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PERANAKAN SILVER uncovered

Muslim Peranakans in Java Baba Pioneers of NUS Dalam Dapur : The Acid Test

MITA (P) 074/08/2004



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DITORIAL Linda Chee

OF MUSLIM PERANAKANS AND MORE

We open this issue with more wonderful insights by George Putrasahan into the Peranakans of Indonesia, this time Muslim Peranakans of Chinese origin dating back to Admiral Cheng Ho in the early 15th century!

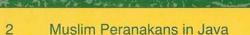
While the strongholds of The Peranakan Association remain in Singapore and Malaysia, evidently our story began in Indonesia in the days of the Majapahit empire, when bride bartering formalised the cementing of ties between empires. Who knows, if you trace your family history far enough, an ancestor or two may just be a Sultan or a Putri Cina.

Not so far back is the evolution of Peranakan silver, an interest which Dr Lye Wai Choong masterfully covers in so simple a manner to appeal to new collectors. Did you know that exactly a hundred years ago, silversmiths were enjoying such a boom in Southeast Asia that they built a temple in Penang just to honour their patron saint? Find out more in Dr Lye's five-page spread on Peranakan silver.

More on our heritage. As the National University of Singapore commemorates its 100th year, it pays tribute to Peranakan pioneers as part of its Centenary celebrations. Visit the exhibition at the University's Museum at the NUS Centre for the Arts from 21 June to 31 December 2005. Learn about the connections of Tan Jiak Kim and Tan Chay Yan to its early history, and our President Uncle Kip, to another challenging period in our lifetime.

What else is coming up? Another treat of pure patois from Gunong Sayang is around the corner. For two nights only, from 9 to 10 September, the play "Belom Mati Belom Tau (The Unpredictable)" will be staged at the Victoria Theatre. In the cast are several members of our Association, such as Shirley Tay, Terry Lim, KT, Mabel Lee and Kevin Aeria. See page 14 for more details.

The Association is organising another fun trip to Malacca. On 23 - 25 September, members can take a comfy bus ride up north to mingle and make merry with fellow ba's and nya's. Details are on page 15. Remember too, our Association Dinner & Dance at Neptune Restaurant on 25 November. As they say, book early to avoid disappointment. Lookout also for our PERANAKAN FESTIVAL in November. Some hints about what to expect can be found at the back of this issue.



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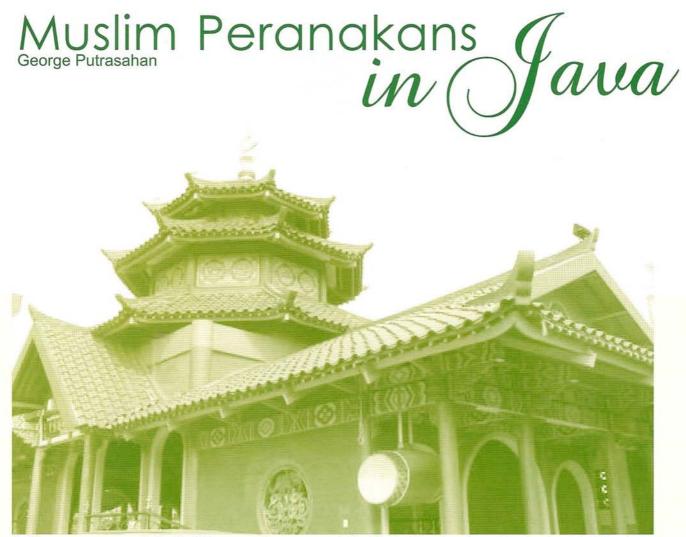
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▲ The mosque, concealed by its Chinese architecture, reveals itself in the Islamic spire and the Jawi script at the window.

henever we read or hear the term Peranakan Cina (or Peranakan Tionghua), our immediate recall is of a locally-born person with mixed Malay-Chinese parentage somewhere along the generation lines, who speaks Malay, and is usually Taoist or Buddhist, and sometimes Christian. Most Peranakans in Malacca, Singapore, Padang, Palembang and Surabaya still practise Chinese customs, even if they have been domiciled in Southeast Asia for many generations.

Indonesia is unique for having a sub-culture of Chinese Peranakan Muslims. Some converted to Islam after marrying local Muslim women. Others have ancestors who were already Muslims when they arrived in Southeast Asia a few hundred years ago. They have not assimilated with the other Chinese communities probably because of the *halal* food requirement, and they are closer to the other ethnic groups who are also Muslims, such as the Sundanese and Javanese.

Admiral Cheng Ho in Semarang

When Admiral Cheng Ho's fleet visited South and Southeast Asia from 1405 to 1430, they also visited Semarang. During that period Java was ruled by the Hindu kingdom of Majapahit. Cheng Ho himself and many of his officers were Muslims. Many believe that it was Cheng Ho who spread the Muslim religion in Java, because he was well respected by the then-Hindu Javanese. He was also much respected by the ethnic

Chinese who elevated him to deity status and revered him as Sam Po Kong, Sam Po Tai Jin or Sam Po Tua Lang (in Hokkien).

"Many believe that it was **Cheng Ho** who spread the Muslim religion"

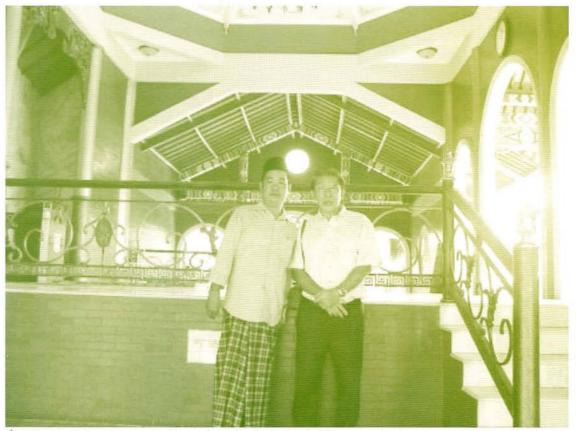
of offering Chinese women, referred to as *Putri Cina*, to become the wives of the ruling Sultans. Their offspring were Peranakans in the true sense.

relationships, gave rise to a practice

generational line of Muslims was not given Chinese family names. Only their mothers were Chinese, so they were given a second and

Peranakans in Javanese courts

China's desire for good relations with Southeast Asia, and thus new trading third name. One offspring by the name of Djim Boen, who was a prince of the Majapahit kingdom, revolted against his father the King



George Putrasahan and a Peranakan Muslim in front of the prayer hall.



▲ In the garden, a replica of Cheng Ho's galleon against a mural depicting the admiral in Southeast Asia.

and established his own Islamic Kingdom in Demak.

Giving himself the title of Raden Patah (Al Fatah), he later attacked his own father. The kingdom began to crumble because of the bitter infighting amongst contenders to the throne. Finally, most of the Hindu groups withdrew to the mountains in East Java or to the island of Bali, where until today the majority of the people are Hindus.

Even today in Bali, the legend lives on about the union between the dark-complexioned Hindu King and the fair-skinned Chinese princess who brought along from her native country the longan tree, resulting in Bali enjoying orchards of longans. Masjid Cheng Ho in Surabaya In the past, mosques were built all over Indonesia mostly designed with the heavy influence of Middle Eastern architecture. Some later mosques incorporated more local features from Javanese architecture. The Cheng Ho Mosque in Surabaya, inaugurated in May 2003, is unique in resembling a Chinese temple.

Built by Peranakan Muslims, it is named Masjid Cheng Ho as a reminder that the great admiral was a Muslim who had helped spread Islam in Java in the 15th century. The mosque, with its own kindergarten and clubhouse, has become a sort of community centre for the Muslims living in the surrounding area.

RANAKAN SILVER Uncovered

Fig. 1 Barber bowl embossed with court figures in landscape on base and round the sides, profusion of marine life and vegetation on the rim. Marked LW for Luen Wo of Canton, ca. 1880.

Dr Lye Wai Choong provides a useful introduction to the fascinating topic of Peranakan silver, for new collectors or enthusiasts alike.

Peranakan silver is one of many representations of the Peranakan material culture which includes porcelain, textiles, beadwork, furniture, gold and jewellery. It is preferably referred to as Peranakan silver rather than Straits Chinese silver because it was used not only by the Peranakans from the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore, but was also found in the homes of the Indonesian Peranakans in the towns of Palembang, Padang, Semarang, etc as well as the Peranakan communities of Thailand, such as in Phuket. The seminal publication *Straits Chinese Silver: A Collectors Guide*, by Dr Ho Wing Meng, provided an early extensive account of the topic and in a way left little to be added.

The study of Peranakan silver must be tied in with the evolution of the Peranakan communities in the region. Although there were Chinese communities in this region for many centuries, at that time the number of Chinese residents was not large enough to create a market for the production of silver artefacts for their sole use. However, from the mid 19th to the early 20th century, the region experienced an economic boom contributed by a relatively stable political and economic environment from British rule. There was trade and interaction among the Peranakan communities of the Straits Settlements, Indonesia and Thailand. For example, marriages were arranged among the prominent Peranakan families of Penang, Medan and Phuket.

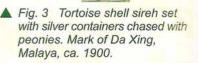
Unlike Peranakan porcelain which was invariably imported from China, Peranakan silver wares came from different sources. Early records suggested that some Chinese silversmiths were already operating in Sumatra in the late 18th century. Unfortunately, evidence of silver wares from the late 18th to early 19th century is not available. It is likely that the majority of silver wares used by the Peranakans from the mid to late 19th century were imported from China, particularly from Canton and Shanghai.

With the rapid growth of the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and the potential for business in the region, many Chinese silversmiths migrated to the Straits Settlements and other major cities in Southeast Asia. Most of the early silversmiths were from the Guangdong province. They produced silver wares for the affluent Peranakans. A comprehensive range of traditional techniques were employed, namely, beating, openwork, filigree and casting. Decorations were made by chasing, matting, embossing, and appliqué.

Although the silversmithing techniques were Chinese, the forms and decorations might be influenced by Malay and Indian works, resulting in a syncretic piece of silver ware that reflected the hybridised culture of the Peranakans. By 1905, the silver and gold- smithing industry was so well established in Malaya that a temple was built to honour the Ming dynasty patron saint of



▲ Fig. 2 Ogival shaped belt buckle pierced and embossed with prawn and fish motifs within the central medallion, surrounded by the eight immortals, phoenixes, peonies, qilins and marine life on the rim. Malaya ca. 1890.



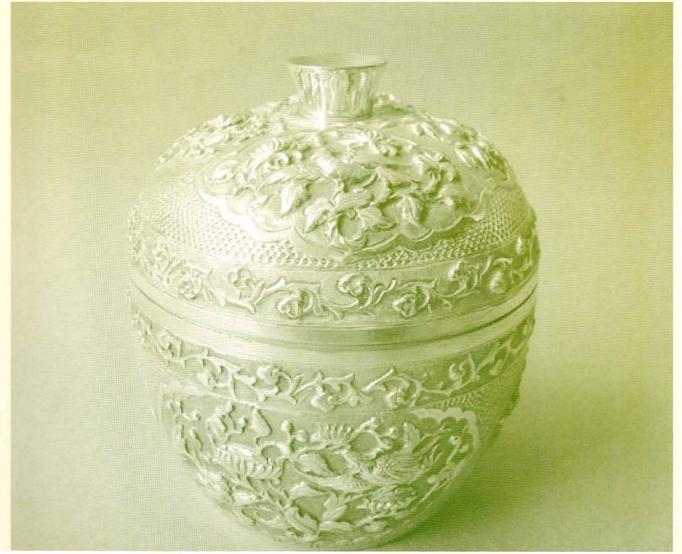
jewellers, *Hu Ching*. The building still stands in Muntri Street, Penang. A total of over 1,300 silversmiths from the region contributed to the building fund. Finally, interaction among the Peranakan communities meant that silver wares produced from Chinese or local silversmiths in Indonesia and Thailand may be found in Peranakan homes elsewhere. This resulted in a wide repertoire of socalled Peranakan silver, making the definition and classification problematic.

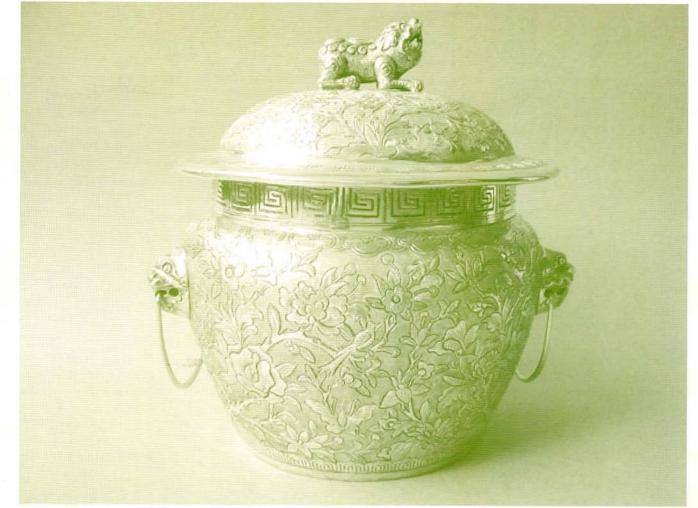
Although Dr Ho attempted to provide a definition of Peranakan silver by limiting it to locally produced silver work with certain unique characteristics in form and design, recent evidence have surfaced to show that this definition is untenable. The common makers of so-called Peranakan silver wares have been Da Xing (Da Hing), Jing Fu and Tian Xing (Tien Hing). Jing Fu has been shown to have a shop in Shanghai and possibly in Canton. The mark Da Xing has been found on Chinese export silver, Thai silver and Peranakan silver. As yet, it is unknown whether Da *Xing* represented the same enterprise with numerous branches in Southeast Asia or different shops altogether. Only *Tian Xing* had been documented to be based in Singapore.

Besides these three common makers, there were many other makers that needed more research to determine their locations. Until one can be certain of the exact locations of these silversmiths, it is impossible and premature to define Peranakan silver based on marks and guess the site of production. As such, until more research is done, presently the definition of Peranakan silver should take into account the influence of Chinese and/or local motifs on Malay, modified Chinese, Indian or Thai form.

Caution should be taken not to confuse Peranakan silver with Chinese export silver which was produced predominantly for the Western market but have overlapping features with Peranakan silver. A more detailed discussion on the definition and classification of Peranakan silver can be found in the article,

▼ Fig. 4 Chupu decorated with prunus scrollwork and cartouches of birds and flowers. Marked Jin Gong within a ru-yi cartouche, Malaya ca. 1910.





▲ Fig. 5 Kamcheng chased with birds and flowers and band of ru-yi scepters. Mark of Da Xing, Malaya, ca. 1920.

'A Century of Straits Chinese Silver (1835-1935)' by Page, Lea and Potash in Silver Magazine.

There is no known Peranakan silver ware that has been confirmed to date from the first half of the 19th century. The Peranakans were at their most affluent from the second half of the 19th to the first half of the 20th century, therefore most of the Peranakan silver wares can be expected to date from this period. Early examples include the barber bowl that could have been used for the ceremonial ritual first shaving of the new born infant (Fig 1) and the elaborate deep *repoussé* and open work belt buckle. The ogival-shaped buckle illustrates the use of traditional Chinese auspicious motifs on a Hindu/Malay form (Fig 2).

Another typical example of Peranakan silver is the *sireh* set which penetrated into the Peranakan culture and became a very important accessory in the Peranakan wedding ritual. When the old Penang *nyonyas* invite someone to a wedding, they would say that they are serving betel leaves or translated in Hokkien as *pang lau heok*. The *sireh* set would also take pride of place on the wedding bed. The practice of chewing *sireh* was Indian in origin and

the *sireh* sets were Malay in form. The Peranakan *sireh* set was made by Chinese silver smiths with modified Chinese motifs (Fig. 3).

At the zenith of Peranakan affluence, a myriad of silver works were produced to cater to demand. The *chupu*, commonly found in Peranakan porcelain, is reproduced in silver. Although the panel has the typical phoenix and peony motif so favoured by the Peranakans, the background is decorated with the prunus scroll work pattern that was commonly used in Chinese silver (Fig. 4). The *kamcheng*, another common form in Peranakan porcelain, is rare in its silver counterpart. The silver *kamcheng* does not have the typical Peranakan motifs that collectors have found so familiar in the porcelain version (Fig 5).

Finally, towards the mid-19th century, the Peranakans became more Westernised. This Western form silver ewer with Chinese battle and courtyard scenes could easily be a piece of Chinese export silver except for the *Da Hing* mark (Fig. 5). The Western style compote with a *Jing Fu* mark is also a typical example of a late piece of possibly Peranakan silver (Fig. 7). In conclusion, more research has to be done into the definition and classification of Peranakan silver. The numerous marks that are found on Peranakan silver must be further studied. Dogma should be avoided and old theories abandoned in the face of new evidence. Only then can a Peranakan silver scholar and collector be able to confidently differentiate Peranakan silver from other types of silver wares.





- Fig. 6 Ewer, Western form, with embossed Chinese figures and bamboo-form handle. Mark of Da Xing, Canton, ca. 1915.
- Fig. 7 Compote, Western form chased with stag, vines and grapes. Mark of Jing Fu, Shanghai, ca. 1925.



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in Education

The NUS Story: 100 Years of Heritage

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Peter Lee

The National University of Singapore commemorates its Centennial with a series of important events this year, including the exhibition, "The NUS Story: 100 Years of Heritage", at the University's Museum at the NUS Centre for the Arts from 21 June to 31 December 2005

The exhibition is a visual journey of the University's history. Over 400 photographs, archival documents, historical publications, memorabilia and multi-media presentations, capture the noble ideals and achievements of its movers and shakers, as well as the ambience and spirit of University life throughout its history.

Of particular interest to the Peranakans is the role played by our forefathers in its early history. Local community leaders, led by the eminent Baba Tan Jiak Kim (who was the first president of The Peranakan Association, then known as the Straits Chinese British Association), petitioned the colonial government for the establishment of a medical school in 1904. The government challenged the community to raise \$71,000. Very quickly, a sum of \$87,077 was raised. Tan Jiak Kim's gift of \$12,000 was the largest.

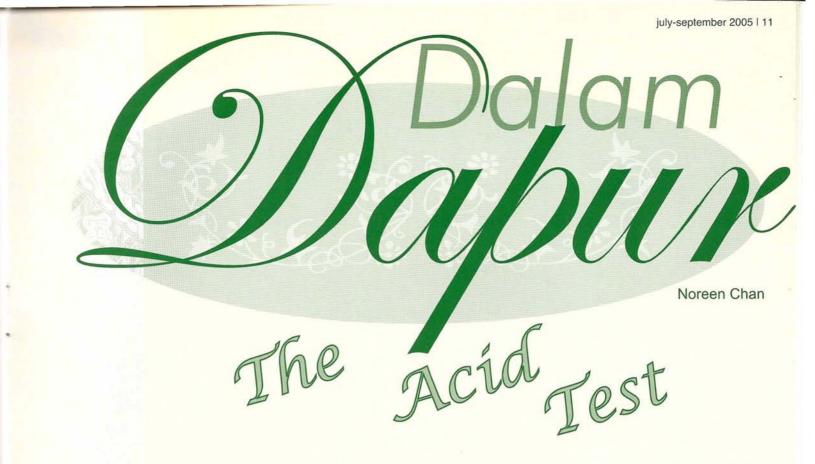
Thus in 1905 the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School was established, occupying a building that was formerly a female lunatic asylum! Luckily for the medical students, the very beneficent and thoughtful Baba rubber tycoon,



Tan Jiak Kim (1859 - 1917)

Tan Chay Yan, donated \$15,000 for the construction of a new building, which was completed in 1911 and named after his father, Tan Teck Guan.

The exhibition also draws links with our Association's current president, whose Raffles College wartime graduation certificate is on display. The Peranakan connection to the University still remains strong after a hundred years, with a substantial donation this year and last year, by a discreet Nyonya to the University in memory of her late, eminent father. We are proud to say that she is also an Association member. More news on this matter will be announced in due course.



There are five primary taste sensations – sweet, sour, salty, bitter and umami. The sour taste is due to protons (H^+) which are ions contained in acids. One might speculate that the evolutionary "value" of being able to taste sour things was in allowing our primitive ancestors to detect unripe fruit and other substances unsuitable for consumption. But over time, humans have evolved to appreciate the sour taste for its own merit, as a balance to other flavours, and to add complexity and interest to the overall taste experience.

The attraction of Peranakan food lies in the complex interplay of spices and flavours – spicy hot, slightly sweet, a little tart. Many regional and national cuisines use acid or sour ingredients to offset the richness of dishes; they range from vinegar or verjuice (juice of unripe grapes), to the juice or pulp of naturally acid fruits.

Sour-tasting dishes are also known to whet the appetite, and putting sour and salty tastes together mellows the intensity of each. For example, sour fruits like *buah kedongdong* can be dipped in salt, and salty dishes like *kiam chye arp (itek tim)* are enhanced by adding lime juice.

The following are ingredients commonly used to add that extra tang to Peranakan dishes:



Asam jawa (Tamarind, *Tamarindus indica*)

Native to tropical America, this member of the *leguminosae* family is widely used from India to Southeast Asia, both as an ingredient in cooked dishes, as well as a snack. The fruits grow in long bean pods which turn brown and brittle when

ripe. The fruit can be semi-dried, sprinkled with sugar (+/a little chilli) for a snack. The dried pulp (often with seeds) is sold in packets, salted and unsalted. To use, the pulp is mixed with hot water and kneaded and squeezed; the resultant brownish liquid is strained to remove the residue before use. Tamarind features in many Peranakan dishes, from ayam buah keluak to udang masak asam nanas. It can also be used as a marinade e.g. in udang goreng asam (or heh asam in Penang), unshelled prawns are soaked in asam for at least half an hour and then fried.



Asam gelugor

(Asam keping, Garcinia atroviridis)

Erroneously called tamarind slices or "skin/peel", these are dried slices of an acid fruit, used in soups (which the brown tamarind juice would discolour) and also in Penang asam laksa. It can be used in place of tamarind but does not have quite the sharp "kick".

Also known as *belimbing* (*ta-lin pling* in Thai), this native of the Moluccas is a small cucumbershaped fruit 4-5cm long, growing in clusters from the trunk or older branches of trees. It can be salted and dried. When I was a child, our *amah* used to dry the fruit and roll it in sugar as a snack.

Bilimbi (Averrhoa bilimbi)

Used in sambal belimbing, sambal jantung pisang, it can also be added to asam pedas and gerang asam. Our amah used to cook small sotong (squid no more than 3 or 4 inches long) in a hot and sour soup flavoured with squid ink, sliced chillis and white onions, and belimbing.



The belimbing fruit is one of a variety of sour ingredients used in Peranakan dishes. Guaranteed to whet the appetite!

To most people, *babi asam* refers to a dish made with sliced pork cooked in a *rempah* of *belachan*, onions and chilli with tamarind added. However, there is an alternative version which comes from my father's side of the family. My paternal great-grandmother, *Mak Cho Payong* (because she liked to carry an umbrella), was well known as a skilful cook; to this day my father says that her *ayam chilli garam* was the best in the world. She was also fond of gambling, too fond some might say, but that is another story.

Her recipe for *babi asam* calls for a piece of belly pork to be well marinaded with *asam* pulp mixed with water and a little salt. True to form, when I asked for quantities, I was told, just *agak agak*. The pork is lightly boiled in the marinade until just firm, taken out, well dried and then stored in the refrigerator for at least three days *sampay serup* (until the flavour develops). The meat is then sliced and fried until crisp, and is eaten with a dip made from minced ginger flavoured with vinegar, sugar and a dash of garlic.



When I asked my Mama why this dish was so-called, she just laughed and said she did not know, maybe it was so delicious, a thief could come in when you were eating it and you would not notice. It was, and still is, a dish that appears on the table when our *belimbing* tree bears fruit, as it is an easy way to use up the harvest that would otherwise go to waste.

Cut *belimbing* fruit into chunks and bash lightly with a mortar. Using a muslin cloth, squeeze out as much juice as possible (or the final result will be too watery). Combine with a little salt, sugar and *sambal belachan* to taste. Finely sliced shallots may be added if desired. It is a delicious piquant relish to accompany fried fish. Keeps for a few weeks in the refrigerator. Face Body Hair Aromatherapy Massage Waxing

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Greed and Retribution GSA's new play explores the dark side.

Peter Lee

As Peranakans we are often ready to talk about the glory of the old days and boast about the contributions of our forefathers in the shaping of Singapore and Malaysian history. G T Lye however, in creating the story for his new play, *Belom Mati Belom Tau (The Unpredictable)*, bravely enters the taboo subject of Peranakan shame.

I am sure many families have terrible skeletons in their closets about domestic life in the old days — the cruelty among family members that seemed so common then, the fraternal squabbles over property, sons being cast out of the house onto the streets, mothers cursing their children on their deathbeds, scandalous affairs among relatives, all of which make perfect material for gripping drama.

This year's GSA production is a fascinating tale set in the 1960s of a woman's naked ambition to secure the family wealth for herself. *Belom Mati Belom Tau* is a typical Baba expression that warns that one can never be sure about one's future. Whether she succeeds is something you have to see for yourself.

As usual, the play's canvas is coloured by the mellifluous sounds of the Baba patois with all the vivacity of its imagery, innuendo, irony, humour, by the many hues of the costumes, and the melodies of new songs composed by G T Lye for this production. Perhaps for the first time, the slightly uncomfortable subject of death and mourning is fully revealed in a play. It is yet another rare and neglected topic, which will be an education for all enthusiasts of Peranakan culture.

The cast includes several members of our Association, such as Shirley Tay, Terry Lim, KT, Mabel Lee and Kevin Aeria.

Gunong Sayang Association has over the years battled to keep the audience's attention against the challenges of raising funds for their productions and of making the plays more accessible and interesting in an increasingly sophisticated Singaporean theatre scene. Although the plays have their critics, I think their primary, and in my opinion, very special value, is in the dialogue. Watch the production, and challenge yourself to pick up something from our dying heritage of language.

Belom Mati, Belom Tau (The Unpredictable) 9 & 10 September, Victoria Theatre. Tickets at \$47, \$37, \$27, available at Sistic counters from 27 July.



A Set in the 1960s, the play tells of a woman's naked ambition to secure the family wealth for herself. Will she succeed?

NOTICEBOARD

New Member

Obituary

Our deepest condolences to the families of the following members: Mr Tan Geok Tian Mr Ng Kim Siang, Tony



The Peranakan Voices Choir needs male singers! Please come forward and sign on. Just call Mrs Lim Geok Huay at Tel: 6255 0704 or Fax: 6353 6801.

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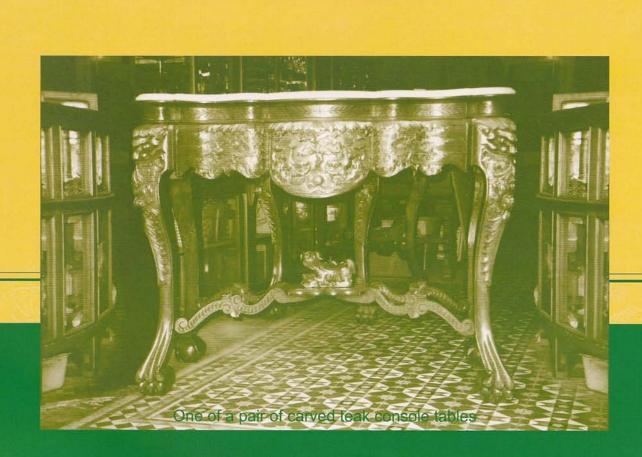
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