

## A collage of various vintage and antique gaming items, including playing cards (King of Spades, Queen of Spades, Jack of Spades, 10 of Spades), dominoes, dice, and various gaming tokens and chips. The items are scattered on a light-colored surface, with some cards showing "VOID" and "KID" markings.

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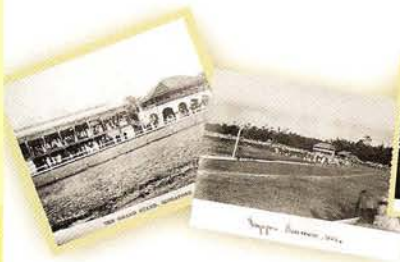
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Cover: Panton courtesy of Mr William Gwee Thian Hock





■ EDITORIAL ■

## ON GAMBLING, OUR NEW LOOK AND JOYOUS FESTIVALS!

By Peter Lee

In the collective memory of the Peranakan psyche, gambling has a unique, prominent place, evoking in equal measures the senses of fascination, enchantment, exhilaration, dread, disappointment and depression!

For this year's dinner and dance commemorating our 105th anniversary, we mark a national milestone that has been a prime topic of conversation among all Singaporeans. Baba Las Vegas, the theme for the evening, celebrates a national fact and a new reality for us.

At the same time it is not a secret that gambling in whatever form has been an integral part of Peranakan life ever since anyone can remember. Cynthia Wee-Hoefer takes us down memory lane, recalling how in so many aspects, gambling somehow always made its presence felt. Dr Lye Wai Choong shares a glimpse of the glamorous side of gambling with his account of horse racing, its history in the Straits Settlements and the world of wealthy Baba horse-owners.

On other aspects of our heritage we have two interesting stories. We present a special family recipe for Nasi Ulam in our regular Dalam Dapur section, which author Noreen Chan has dedicated to the memory of her grandmother the late Elsie Chia. In another feature, Ee Sin Soo records his observations of an increasingly rare practice, of setting up the samkai altar in honour of Ti Kong, the Emperor of Heaven, during the birthday celebrations of an eminent Malaccan.

In this issue we also take a tentative step toward a new image that we hope will express the current aspirations of the Association, to not only preserve and promote the heritage, but to make it part of the fabric of contemporary Singapore and an engaging resource for everyone, irrespective of age.

The first noticeable change is the introduction of more colour pages, and in the issues to come we hope to pique the interests of both young and older readers with an exciting combination of heritage features and stories that document contemporary expressions of our culture and identity.

These changes for the current issue also commemorate a very special event in November — our very first ever Peranakan Festival. It is the Association's most ambitious heritage initiative to date, and we have received tremendous support from both the public and private sectors. Please see our Noticeboard for more information about what's happening.

The last quarter of the year is also full of festivals, so on behalf of the Association may we wish everyone good cheer, good health, and the joyful companionship of loved ones this Deepavali, Hari Raya, Christmas and New Year.



# *Tan Chin Tuan*

(1908 - 2005)

**O**n 13 November 2005, the eminent banker and community leader Tan Sri Tan Chin Tuan passed away at the age of 97. He was for a brief period in 1947, President of the Straits Chinese British Association, the former name of The Peranakan Association. In the souvenir publication for the Association's Golden Jubilee in 1950, the committee paid tribute to Tan Sri Tan with a short account of his career and contributions, which we reproduce below:



*Tan Sri Tan Chin Tuan*

## **“LOCAL BORN MAKES GOOD**

**The name of the Hon. Mr Tan Chin Tuan, another ex-president of the S.C.B.A. figures among the 111 personalities in the latest publication “Biographies of Prominent Chinese in Singapore” which states that to the people in Malaya Mr Tan needs no introduction.**

**Born in Singapore in 1908, Mr Tan received his early education in the Singapore Anglo-Chinese School, and at the age of 17 in 1925 he joined the Chinese Commercial Bank since amalgamated with and now known as the Oversea Chinese Banking Corporation, and he holds the distinction of being the first local-born to hold the post of Managing Director of the Bank.**

**Mr Tan became President of the Singapore SCBA, shortly after the liberation, but relinquished the post later due to pressure of work and other public activities. In 1948 he became the Chinese Chamber of Commerce representative on the first elected Legislative Council in Singapore, and at the same time he was appointed a member of the Executive Council. ”**

*Extracted from the Association's Golden Jubilee Souvenir Programme, 1950*

*Photograph courtesy of Ms Chew Gek Khim*



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# PERANAKAN FLAVOURS AT THE BOTANICS

Halia introduces new lunch menu with Nyonya-inspired concoctions

By Peter Lee

Tucked in a beautiful corner of the Botanic Gardens, Halia restaurant is one of the discreet success stories in the Singapore restaurant scene. Its name is a tribute to the lush grove of rare gingers, which is situated just next to the restaurant. Housed in a wooden pavilion with a large outdoor patio, under the shade of majestic trees and towering palms, Halia couldn't be in a more ideal setting.

The ambiance and the menu reflect the setting — in other words, they evoke relaxed elegance, natural beauty, and the luxuriance of the tropics. Recently the restaurant has introduced a new lunch menu featuring an interesting array of dishes that are infused with distinct tropical flavours.

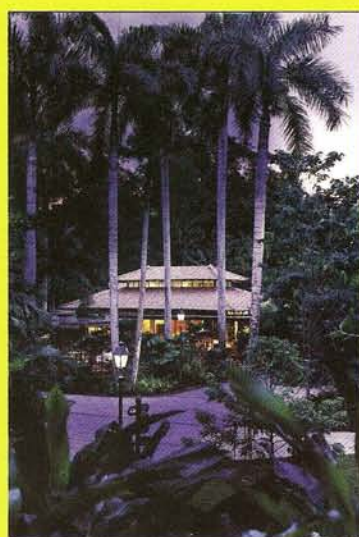
Most noticeably from a Peranakan point of view are the Linguine Vongole "Laksa", which is a successful fusion of two familiar classics. Other interesting Singapore touches can be found in their Chili Crab Spaghettini, which is perfect for those who love the sauce and the meat but

hate the mess of crab shells, and a fillet of "Char Siew" salmon (sort of a teriyaki, but could do with a stronger-flavoured marinade), as well as a Hainanese Chicken Schnitzel (a classic Chicken Chop really). Then there is

the delicious Black Pepper Soft Shell Crab, an Indochinese-style Shrimp Satay Salad and the healthy Aubergine and Tofu Tower. Supporting these 'fusion dishes' are the dependable menu staples, such as hearty soups, Minute Steak, Seafood in Batter and Chips, and Spaghetti Bolognaise (yes, you can take the kids). Prices are reasonable and range from \$6 to \$15 for starters, and \$9 to \$20 for salads, sandwiches and main courses.

The stars for dessert are the rich, velvety Chocolate Brownie Sundae, and a Chilled "Pulut Hitam" in Brandy, that was quite wonderful. Ok, ok, I know your grandmother does it better, but Halia is

certainly worth a visit if you would like to try someone else's attempt at Peranakan flavours.



Halia is at 1 Cluny Road, Ginger Garden Singapore Botanic Gardens (via Tyersall Ave), Tel 64766711. Mon to Fri: 12noon - 11.00pm, Sat, Sun, & Public Holidays: 7.30 - 11.00 pm (breakfast buffet from 8.00 - 11.15 am).





## DALAM DAPUR

## NASI ULAM

By Noreen Chan

In May this year, there was a lively discussion on the Peranakan Yahooogroups about nasi ulam and the herbs used to make this dish. Ulam in Malay means "raw vegetables". Nasi ulam is a dish of Malay origin made by mixing cooked rice with a variety of raw herbs, and often cooked fish and/or prawns.

As one might expect, the recipes vary across households and there are regional variations. In northern Malaysia and Penang one is more likely to find daun kadok being used. The basic flavourings for rice include belachan and kerisik (dry toasted grated coconut). My family recipe calls for the kerisik to be ground until it becomes a paste.

It is labour intensive and does not keep well, so it should be prepared a few hours before it is to be eaten. The dish lends itself to an infinite number of variations according to availability of ingredients and personal preference. The last time my family made nasi ulam, my mother and her sister, my cousin and myself gathered in the kitchen to slice, dice and mix, under the watchful but benevolent eye of my grandmother who declared herself "retired" from formal cooking duties. In the best Peranakan fashion, the dish was liberally seasoned with gossip and laughter, and served up to family and friends in celebration. It was accompanied by Soup Petani, a spicy curry-flavoured chicken soup garnished with fried cubes of bread; I suspect it is a form of mulli-gatawny soup, itself

an Anglo-Indian concoction. Soup Petani only made its appearance in companionship to nasi ulam.

The liberal use of fragrant herbs in Peranakan cooking is a reflection of Malay and Indonesian influences. Although less common nowadays, some families still enjoy makan ulam, a mixture of raw herbs and vegetables – including cucumber, kacang botol or angled bean, petai or stinkbean – accompanied by sambal belachan or prawn sambal. A wide variety of puchot and ulam can be found at Geylang Serai market, and nasi padang stalls may feature dishes using vegetables such as daun ubi, daun turi and puchot pakis.

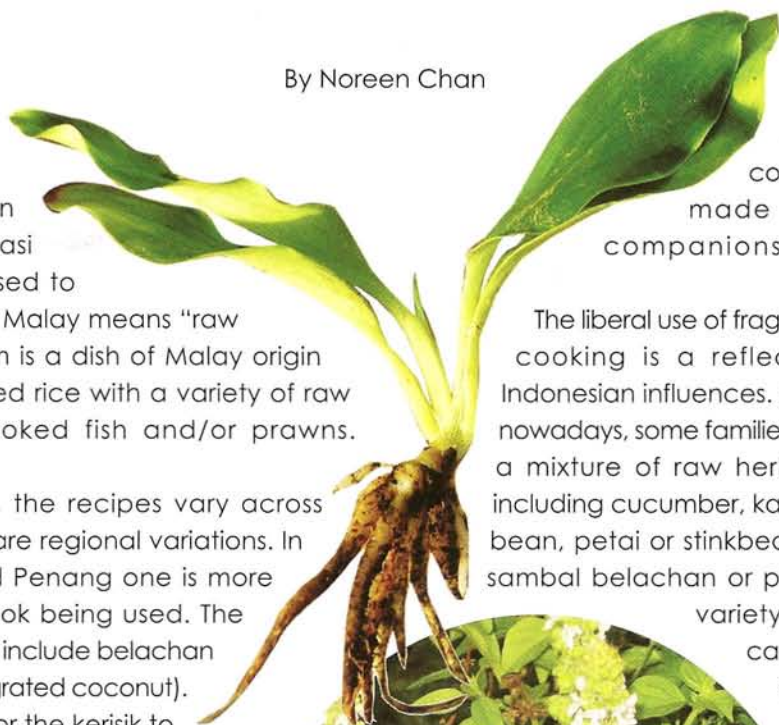
Some of the common herbs include:

**Daun kunyit** (*Curcuma longa*, *C. domestica*) or turmeric leaf. Well known

across Asia, the rhizome is often used dried and ground, as a flavouring and colouring. It is said to have antiseptic properties. For nasi ulam, one needs the tender young leaves or puchot kunyit.

**Daun kadok** (*Piper sarmentosum*) or wild pepper leaf. Also known as cha plu, it is

(From top) Daun kenchor, Daun kemangi and Daun lemoh perut





used in the Thai dish mieng, as a wrapper for a mixture of dried prawns, peanuts, diced limes, ginger and garlic, chili and palm sugar. It is similar in appearance to the betel leaf, but is a darker green with a finely veined surface. The plant is a ground creeper and can be found in the Angullia Park area. My Penang friends insist that the Singapore variety is not as aromatic as the ones found up north.

**Daun kemangi** (*selasih*) or **Asian basil** (*Ocimum spp.*). Frequently scattered as a garnish on *udang masak asam nanas* (asam prawns with pineapple). The small leaves give off a pleasant citrus scent.

**Daun kenchor** (*Kaempferia galangal*). Also known as *chekur* or *kenchur*, it was described by German botanist Engelbert Kaempfer (who also described *ginkgo biloba*). The rhizome is sold fresh or dried (sliced or powdered) and has medicinal uses as well as being used in cooking e.g. in Indonesian *pecel* paste. It has a camphor-like fragrance. The young leaves are used in *nasi ulam*.

**Daun lemongrass** (*Citrus hystrix*, *C. papedia*, *C. amblycarpa*) or *kaffir* or *leprous lime leaf* (for the bumpy, wrinkled rind of the fruit). The distinctive two-sectioned "figure-of-eight" leaves are a staple of many Southeast Asian dishes, adding their perfume to a wide variety of dishes and condiments, from *tom yum* soup to *sambal belachan*. For *nasi ulam*, choose the young tender leaves and remove the tough central rib before slicing.

Other herbs that may be used are:

**Daun pegaga** (*Centella asiatica*) or Asian pennywort. Known also as *gotu kola* in India, it can be juiced up as a refreshing drink.

**Daun sekenjut** (*Paederia scandens*) so named for its pungent smell.

**Daun Mengkudu** (*Morinda Citrifolia*) or noni leaf.

## RECIPE

If the following recipe, copied from Mama's book, bears no resemblance whatsoever to your family recipe, that is probably to be expected. I like to think of it as showing the rich variety and creativity that permeates Peranakan cuisine.

The rice must be cool before mixing or the herbs will wilt and lose their taste and colour. *Nasi ulam* is best eaten fresh but will keep for half a day in the refrigerator. If keeping for longer or overnight, omit the diced cucumber and mix in just before serving.

### NASIK ULAM (about 20 people)

- 1) 8 tahils [300g] *blachan* – mashed with a little water.  
Pour in 1 teacup oil – *tumis* until *wangi*. Add 10 leaves *lemau perot* and 1 small soup bowl prawn stock & cook until thickish.
- 2) 1 big or 2 small coco-nut (no skin) scrape, fry over low fire until light brown and grind fine.
- 3) 8 tahlil b.merah [shallots] – iris fry and keep in bottle
- 4) 6-7 b. puteh [garlic] – iris fry and keep in bottle
- 1, 2, 3, 4 prepare 1 day before.
- 5) *Udang kring* 20 cts [a fistful], clean, pound fine
- 6) coco-nut (no skin) scrape
- 7) 3 stalk *seray* [lemongrass] iris fine  
Fry *udang kring* till *wangi*, lift out; fry scrape coco-nut till dry add *seray* iris. Mix 5, 6, 7 together.
- 8) 1 kati prawns wash and shell, fry with a little salt (no oil)
- 9) 2 katis *ikan parang*, *ikan chincharu* or *ikan selar*, bake in oven, remove bones and break into small pieces
- 10) 6-8 cucumbers with skin, cut and dice
- 11) 20 young long beans iris
- 12) 12 puchok kunyit (3 bundles or about 18 leaves) iris fine
- 13) puchok kenchor (15 leaves) iris fine
- 14) *Daun lemau perot* (15 leaves) iris fine

20 soup bowls of cooked rice. Spread on tray to cool. Mix in 1, 2, salt and sugar to taste until colour is right and *wangi*. Add 5, 6, 7 mixture, a little of 10, 11, 12, 13, 14. Put the rice in a plate and garnish with prawns, fish, 3 and 4 before serving. Have *sambal belachan* on the side.



This article is dedicated to my late grandmother Mdm Elsie Chia, who passed away on 7 August 2005. *Nasi ulam* was one of her "signature dishes", one she had even demonstrated at the YWCA decades ago. Most of the recipes featured in the "Dalam Dapur" series of articles were hers, or collected by her. Most of what I know about my family, as well as our collection of photographs – some nearly 100 years old – also came from her. She was, to quote my Ee Poh Keong Tuan, "a true Peranakan Nyonya and a real lady 100%".





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# LEARNING TO PLAY MAHJONG



By Cynthia Wee-Hoefer

My childhood years revolved around the Peranakan enclave of Longkang Besar ('Big Drain Lane') in Katong where all manners of gambling took place.

At a tender age when we children could figure out numbers, there was the itinerant tikam-tikam man who sold sherbet pink and pistachio green wafers in a glass-panelled tin box. The Indian bhai wielded a loud bell, not unlike the old-fashioned school bell, to summon us to wager an extra sweet by placing a ball-bearing through his own invention of roulette. If the ball landed on the right numbered hole, we would have won. We always lost.

At the corner Indian shop, the uncle had this other tikam-tikam game whereby sealed numbers are stuck in rows on a large cardboard. You pay a few cents to pluck off a tikam and a lucky strike would gain you one to five dollars or a plastic kuti-kuti (miniature car or shoe, anything) as a consolation prize.

So there we were brought up to accept betting, winning and losing as amusements and not vices. It got to the point when the adults would prove to be utterly ridiculous in their pursuit of numbers for chap-ji-kee or 4-D.

A baby cutting teeth would be showered with the rolled-up pieces of twelve digits and the two that got stuck in his pate would be the hot numbers for tomorrow's stake. A girl entering puberty would be asked to spread her legs standing up and to throw the numbers between the legs. The furthest crumpled paper yielded the first of the numbers and so forth another time or four times. All her protestations would have gone unheeded. It was always the woman folk that engaged in such mind-

boggling activity. The passive husbands would just cough up the money for the runner who regularly appeared at the appointed time of the day. So how did the result of the chap-ji-kee get circulated? In our little lane, the fateful numbers were ingeniously disclosed through a mock clock on the wall of the barber's shed.

My late mak angkat godmother Madame Jane Wee, was the chief honcho of gambling in my mind. Not a day would pass without some form of card game, cher kee or mahjong going on in her home. She loved the small bets here and there and she became entrepreneurial in the shared interest of gambling with her kakis (associates).

As a widow with a mother and two daughters to support, Madame Jane supplemented her income by collecting tong or pocket money for the gaming sessions. She was also well known for her beadwork and cooking.

She provided the coffee, snacks and location; they paid her small sums in exchange, a fair deal. Game began late morning with a lunch break and ended just before six o'clock. Sometimes, another set of players would take over until late at night.

Madame Jane's house held quite an attraction to me as a young girl. Apart from the players, a steady stream of visitors would pop in. There was Bibik Buruk bearing baskets of nonya cakes and gossip, riding in on a hired trishaw. Occasionally, a hard-luck lady would appear





and in hush-hush tones, ply a piece of jewellery for sale. It could have been the sociability of the bibiks and the lone baba at the mahjong table that caught my interest.

There was Tachi Katek (short sister) who habitually smoked mentholated Consulate cigarettes out of the round tins. She was always grimacing with one eye closed, perhaps because of the smoke she exhaled. There was Auntie Mabel, who played regularly after her retirement as a lawyer's clerk. Bibik Chye Neo, Bong Soo, Allan and Si-Taik Lalat and Nya-chik made the roll of players. There was always someone or other to make the foursome and I never learnt anyone's real names.

I often sat on a stool behind Susie who was Jane's daughter, and watched. She was my unofficial coach in a sense that I could relate better with her. It was incestuous what came out of her mouth whenever the winning card eluded her. I absorbed all the banter of the old ladies and the teasing the poor Uncle Beng Keng was subjected to. It was all part of the game and no hard feelings after that.

Yet, there was an instance in Madam Jane's life when she and her kakis were rounded up in a police raid at somebody else's house. The old bibiks were sent to the old Joo Chiat police station whereupon charges were made against them for gambling.

In court, the presiding judge chided the prosecutor for bringing up the charges against a bunch of amiable old ladies and dismissed the case. This episode was a triumph for the Katong folks and a tale much talked about for years to come. The suspect who ratted on them did so because she was dropped from the games for being extremely fastidious. She was forgiven in the end and returned to the fold.

And this was how I learned to play mahjong. The thrill for me was to touch the mahjong cubes, hard plastic cubes with the engraved details that the experts would slide their thumb through and close it down without a glance. I was eager to help out stack the cards whenever a

player was indisposed by a toilet break. I would proudly show off my understanding of the game by arranging the cards in the right groups – bamboos, characters, balls, the winds – and waiting like a puppy for a pat on the head for doing it right.

As part of apprenticeship, I became a gofer for the mahjong players. I had to run to the Joo Chiat or Marshall Road corner coffee shop with the tiffin-carrier with orders to buy laksa with lots of towgay and sambal chili or char-kway teow with lashings of chili or to buy large packets of Consulate. The more I stood attendant behind one player or another, the nuances and complexity of this great game became more apparent. Soon I learned why one should "break" one's hand to avoid supplying the big one. The loud call of "Pau" hit you like a karate blow if

you had been careless or brave in dropping the forbidden card. The tension at the close of a round was palpable though the stakes were not so high.

My big day finally came when I was asked to stand in as a full player at the age of 16 years. It must have been out of desperation that they chose me. I had been earning pocket money giving tuition so the aunts were aware that I had the resources to lose.

It was heady to battle the experts with full confidence. I was bait for these sharks. I stumbled and lost several games, got told off ("Bodoh, why you throw this one?") for dispatching the wrong cards. They played fast and clucked at my beginner's pace; they even laughed a rip-roaring outburst when I was short of cards. Then I made the faux pas. I threw the pau card and someone got the

winning hand. I paid dearly for that. I had to empty my drawer to finance the other players' share. My pride took a plunge before these smug oldies and I desperately suppressed my inner turmoil to appear cool.

My game of mahjong did not end there. I was resolved to play better but I also knew to pick the players of my own standing. Lesson learnt.



*Madam Jane always felt that picking lucky numbers on children's birthday's was auspicious. (below) Bibiks playing cherki at Madam Jane's.*





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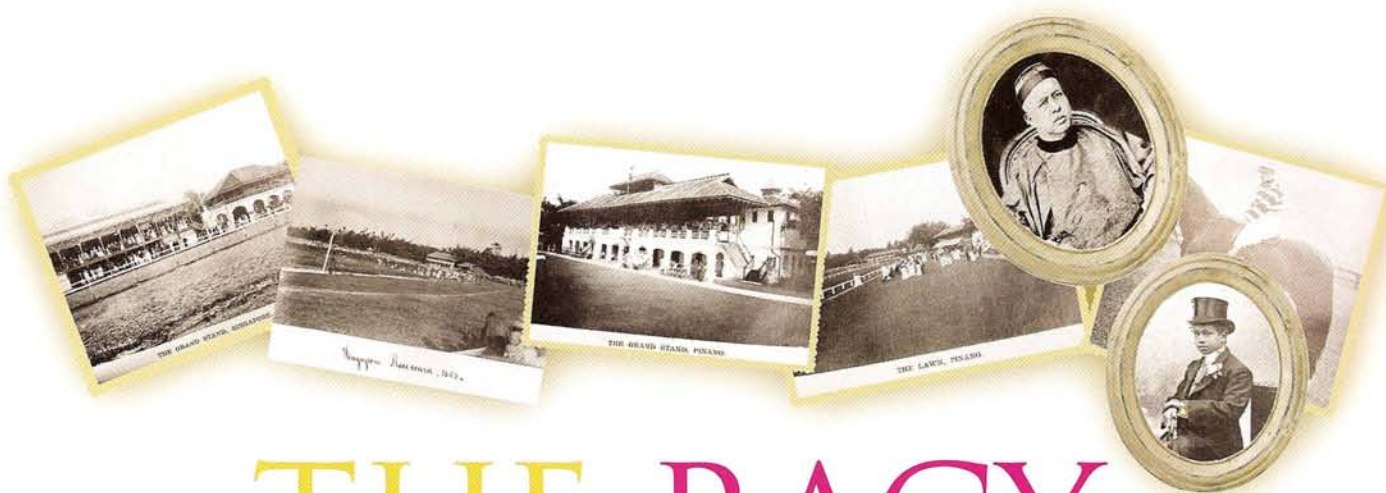


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# THE RACY PERANAKANS

By Dr Lye Wai Choong

By the end of the 19th century, the Peranakans had become a sizable and affluent community in the Straits Settlements. Unlike the pioneer generations who had lived and worked hard in the early to mid 19th century, the younger Peranakans of the Victorian era had taken to leisure. Into the 20th century, one of the favourite hobbies of the Peranakans was horse racing.

Horse racing first appeared in Singapore in 1843, on 23 and 25 February to be exact, that is, on a Thursday and Saturday. The programme started at 11 am; the prize of 150 Straits dollars for the Singapore Cup was won by Mr W H Read. By 1846, a wooden stand with attap roof had been built at the vicinity of the present Race Course Road, but the centre of the course had still not been cleared of weeds. By 1900, a more impressive stand situated near Serangoon Road had replaced the old wooden structure.

Initially the races were held once a year; later there were two meetings per year, one in May and the other

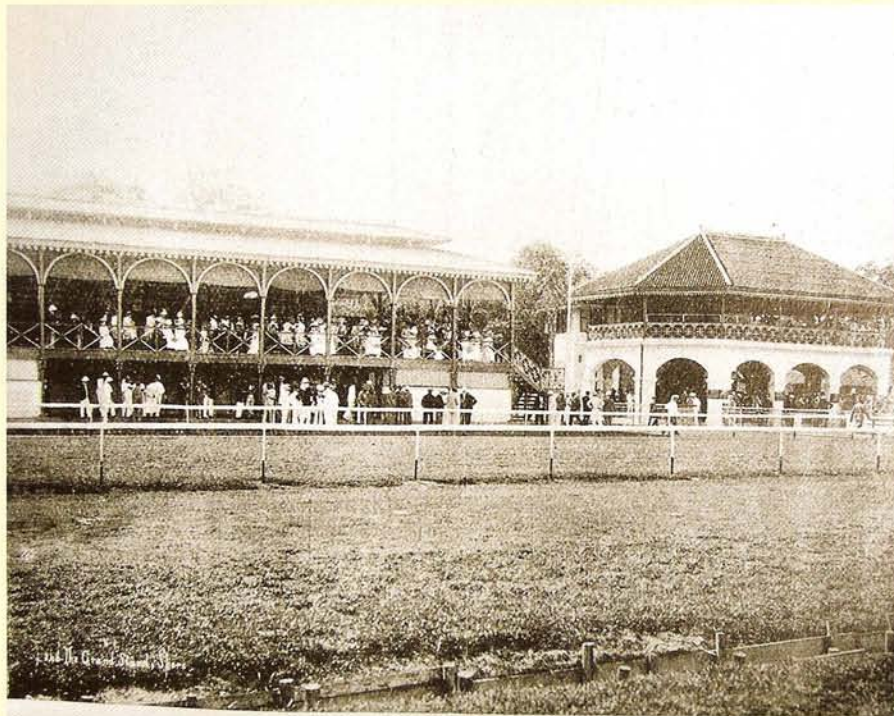
in October. Originally the racing was confined to gentlemen riders, by 1867 professional jockeys were allowed to race. Horse racing in the Straits Settlements was controlled by the Straits Racing Association with representatives from the Singapore Sporting Club, Penang Turf Club, Selangor Turf Club and Seremban Gymkhana Club.

The most prestigious race of the Singapore Sporting Club was the Singapore Derby which covered a distance of a mile and a half for a cup presented by the committee and prize money of 2,000 Straits dollars. The stands and lawn of the racecourse were occupied by Europeans but the course inside the track was thronged with multitudes of Chinese. Betting was allowed on the course only through the Totalisator which was under the management of the committee. The Turf Club in Penang was founded in 1867. In 1869, the first wooden and attap stands and buildings were erected. Initially small annual meetings were held and by 1898 two meetings were organised annually in January and July. The

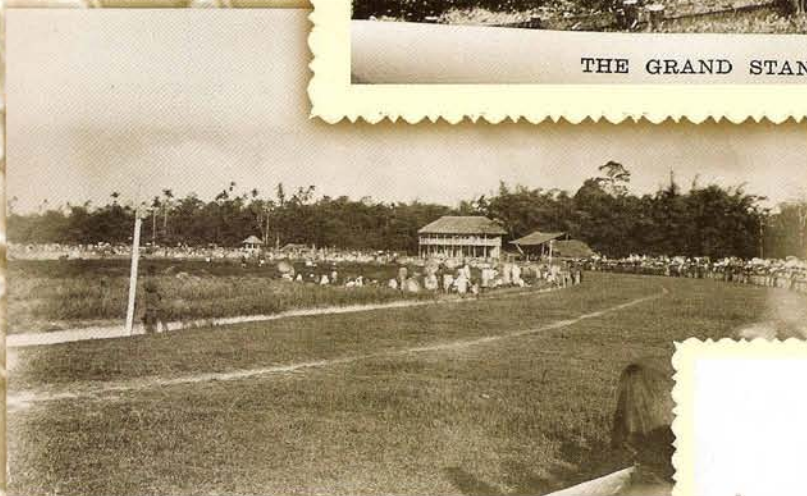
days of the race meetings were observed as holidays. By 1907, race horsing had become so popular that the total prize money was over \$26,000. Membership grew to 500 members. The entries included horses from Singapore, the Netherlands Indies (Indonesia), Burma (Myanmar), India and the Federated Malay States.

The very wealthy Singapore and Penang Peranakans were actively involved in horse racing. One prominent Penang Peranakan was Lee Toon Tock. He was the son of Lee Phee Choon and grandson of Lee Geang, both wealthy merchants. Their family had been residing in Penang for four generations since the early 1800s. Lee Toon Tock was born in Penang in 1875 and received his education at Penang Free School and at Roberts' College, Calcutta, India. After his education, he managed his estate of 1,800 acres comprising plantations of coconut, betel-nut and tapioca. In 1886, he married the daughter of Khoo Chew Eng. By 1907 he had six sons. He started racing at 22 years old and was a





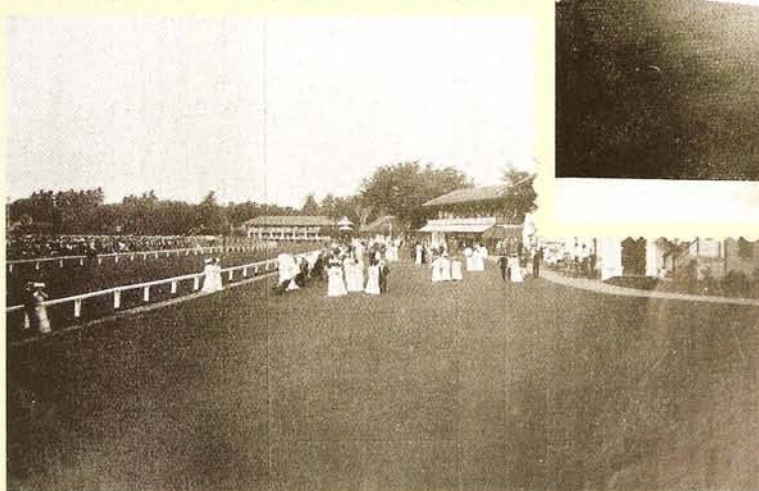
THE GRAND STAND, SINGAPORE.



*Singapore Racecourse, 1864*



THE GRAND STAND, PINANG.



THE LAWN, PINANG.

(From top)  
 The Grand Stand, Singapore, ca 1900  
 Singapore Racecourse, ca 1864  
 (photo courtesy of Peter Lee)  
 The Grand Stand, Penang, ca 1900  
 The Lawn, Penang, ca 1900





*Lee Toon Tock  
and his horse,  
Senator, ca 1905*



*Lee Toon Tock  
with his two  
trophies, ca 1905*



*Tan Kim Ching  
(above), Tan Boo Liat  
(left) and his horse,  
Vanitas (below)  
c.1905*



*Lee Toon Tock's  
silver trophy, 44 cm  
diameter, maker's  
mark WH for Wang  
Hing, Canton ca  
1900. Collection of  
WC Lye & Dan Lea*







*Mrs Lee Choon Guan in baju Shanghai (seated middle) and two nonyas in baju panjang at the Singapore races, ca 1920 (photo courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa)*

well known member of the Penang Turf Club. He was the proud owner of numerous horses, including the Senator, and the famous Oberon, which won the Maiden Plate in 1904 and set a record at the Singapore course of 1 minute 52 seconds.

At that time, many of the trophies that were awarded at the races were silverwares imported from China. Two impressive trophies are shown in a photograph of Lee Toon Teck from the 1910s. The trophy on his left hand side has the shape of a large punch bowl with a scalloped rim and winged dragon handles. The rounded sides have panels containing flowers of the four seasons on a pierced base of billowing clouds supported on winged dragons. The bowl sits on a customised hongmu (blackwood) carved dragon and foliate scroll decorated stand. The bowl carries a maker's mark, WH, for Wang Hing, Canton and Hong Kong.

In Singapore, the great-grandson of Tan Tock Seng was an avid horse racer. Mr Tan Boo Liat was the son of Tan Soon Toh and the grandson of Tan Kim Ching. Mr Tan Kim Ching was a wealthy rice merchant who operated rice mills in Bangkok and the Straits Settlements. He also held the position of Siamese Consul-General. As we are all fully aware, Tan Tock Seng founded the hospital that presently bears his name. Their company was named Kim Ching and was situated at 28, Boat Quay.

Mr Tan Boo Liat had several race horses, the most famous of which was Vanitas which won the Viceroy's Cup in India. A well-respected representative of the Straits Chinese community, Tan Boo Liat was present at the coronation of King Edward VII in 1901. By the 1920s, the Peranakan women were liberated enough to be allowed into the race courses. The nonyas dressed in their baju panjang or baju shanghai had become emboldened to enjoy an afternoon of leisure at the races. Like the English counterpart, the Ascot, the racecourse had become a prestigious venue and only the upper crust of the Peranakan society could be present there.

## BIBIK LAS VEGAS...IN THE 1920S!

By Noreen Chan

My great-great-greatgrandmother (my grandmother's paternal grandmother) Mrs Chia Hood Theam (or Mak Puteh or Nyonya Tawee as she was also known) was an inveterate gambler. My Mama Elsie used to keep the accounts for her Mama, whose husband would give her a thousand dollars at a time to gamble. She could gamble away as much as \$100-200 a day, a lot of money at the time (1920's).

Almost every day, she would tell the household jokingly "Mama mau naik sekolah" (.....) when the car came at noon to fetch her to the home of her niece, who "pungot tong" (.....). On her return she would hand the remainder money to my grandmother, sometimes as little as \$4 left. When my grandmother commented, "Ala, Mama, orang nampa lu tua, mesti kena tipu!" (.....) to which would come the reply, "Eh, dosa! Ini saudara gua, tau! Ayah, tangan gua busok lah!" (.....).

My father's paternal grandmother Mrs Chia Keng Chin, also loved to gamble, and pawned much of her jewellery. When her husband found out, he was so furious he threatened to shoot her! She ran next door to her brother-in-law's house, and my Mama Elsie was at home sewing. Everyone else was out. So she had to hide her Mak Im behind a tall cupboard and when Pek Pek came stomping in with his shotgun, she pretended that she had not seen anyone. After a brief search he left and Mak Im could come out but had to wait until things cooled down before she went home.







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# BABA ONLINE

By Heather Ong



perANAKan, the youth group of The Peranakan Association, was launched in 1998 with over 200 members from 20 to 40 years of age. Over the years, it has dwindled to a core group of about 20 regulars who faithfully organise and support the events. The rest: truly 'lost' or just disinterested.

In my 9 years as a perANAKan, the core group that once danced, learned and makan together, has undergone inevitable changes. Some got married, others had children or moved abroad. The students among us graduated, the juniors earned promotions at work, and few had enough time to volunteer for their Peranakan roots.

To engage more young Peranakans, we plan to work with students from the National University of Singapore. They have always been very interested in our speakers' presentations, often staying back after an event for further discussions. We have taken steps to acquaint ourselves with University staff & administrators, and we hope to have Peranakan Clubs in NUS, NTU and other institutions of higher learning one day.



**The yahoogroups forum** is popular with members and friends in their late 20's to 40's. Most forum participants have fond memories of grandma or aunts who were true-blue Peranakans. They recall relatives wearing the sarong kebaya, savouring home-cooked Peranakan food; and customs and pantangs associated with the Lunar New Year or Bulan Tujuh. Topics posted range from "where can I find ingredients for making nasi ulam?" to "can I learn to make my own kebaya sulam?" I hope this group will use the forum more, to arrange group outings and events like November's Peranakan Convention or the Annual Dinner & Dance. Just email [peranakan-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:peranakan-subscribe@yahoogroups.com)



**The friendster forum** caters to a younger tier of Peranakans in their early 20's. We started this group because if their interest is not stimulated now, we fear that they will know next to nothing about their heritage. Their parents would probably be in their 50's, and many modern Peranakan mothers confess to speaking only English with their children. They don't cook authentic Peranakan food, nor practise any of the customs.

Young nyonya Lovelynne Chong, says: "Friendster has been around for a few years now. One of my buddies urged me to join. Within a few months, I had so many friends leaving messages, friends whom I thought I had lost contact with, and new friends with similar interests. Its bulletin board acts as a mass announcement centre where I can just post one single message to reach out to all my friends."

Friendster can act as a virtual 'meeting' place for young & old Peranakans all over the world and exchange ideas online. It can also act as a web to share Peranakan culture with fellow Peranakans as well as non-Peranakans. Be a Friendster member for free. All it takes is just 5 minutes to register at . Go to the search bar, search by email: "per\_anak\_an@yahoo.com.sg", and click add Peranakan as friend. Now you're officially a Peranakan's friend!

Dynamic young Peranakans, part-Peranakans or even non-Peranakans, do join us to help grow the PerANAKan group. Spread the word about Friendster (they would probably be logged in already) or get them to contact Heather at [<youth@peranakan.org.sg>](mailto:youth@peranakan.org.sg)

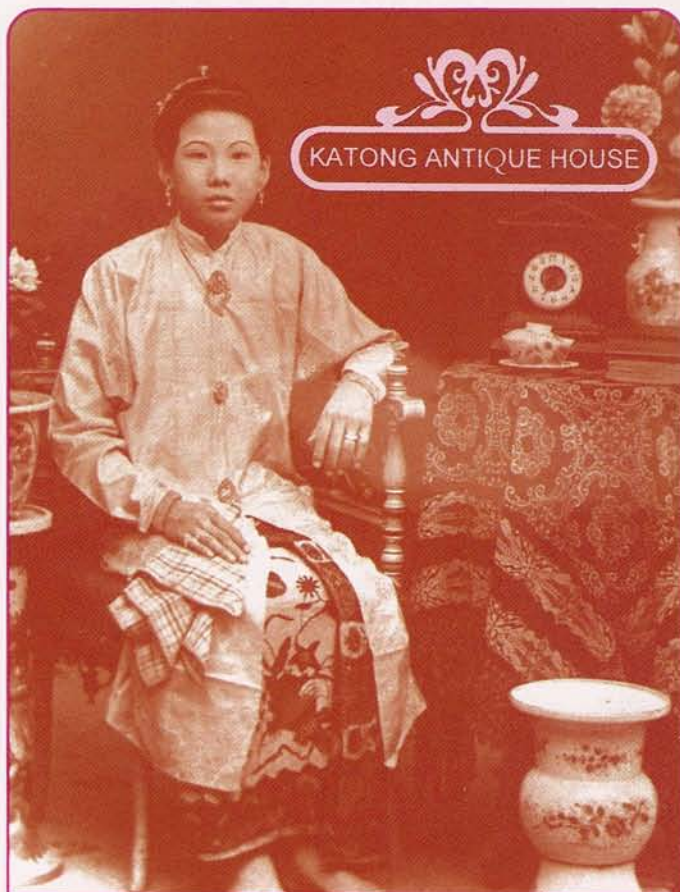
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By Lovelynne Chong

Let me be brutally honest. I am about 21 years old and I had only just joined the Association this year. When I was told by my friends from the Peranakan Youth Group that I was attending my first "true blue" Peranakan function, my imagination went into overdrive. How exciting can it be for me?

mean, most people my age would not have been caught dead on a Saturday night attending a function at a community centre. Most of my friends that evening were either going for a movie, hitting the usual nightspots at Clarke Quay or Mohd Sultan. Or just meeting up at some usual hangout like Starbucks or The Coffee Club.

But here I was on my way to soak up all this Peranakan culture. I guess you can say that there is a first time for everything. I did not know what to expect save for the fact that Bibik & Baba Night 2005 on 16 July 2005 was organised by the Queenstown Community Centre and supported by the Peranakan Association.

The first thing I noticed was how the ambience was spectacularly transformed by the beautiful sarong

kebayas that most of the nyonyas were wearing. I was even more impressed as the night wore on that not all who were beautifully dressed up were performers. They were simply so proud of their heritage to shout aloud "I am a Nyonya!" through their kebayas. That moment, I felt a little underdressed in my jeans and T-Shirt.

As a 'first-timer' to a Peranakan Association function, I was dazzled and amazed by how the night went on. What I noticed most was the genuine feeling this was not just your typical dinner show. It was a coming-together of people from a unique community in Singapore.

It was about family ties as well. I lost count how many times I was introduced to somebody's father or mother, uncle or aunty, cousin or 2nd cousin, nephew or niece etc. It wasn't a room full of strangers; it was full of friends







"I am told that we Peranakans really know how to party. Before, I always attributed that (knowing how to party) to my very special personality. Now I know it is genetic."

and family. Everyone mingled around, catching up with each other. I could literally feel the excitement and enthusiasm in the air.

We finally got to see the Association's brand-new TPV band that everyone was talking about. They had everyone jumping off their seats to fill the dance floor. Their serenades of love songs and merry-making really put everyone in a swinging mood. Our choir, The Peranakan Voices, was at its very best belting song after song without breaking out in so much as a drop of sweat.

I never appreciated Peranakan songs before; I never knew any. I watched my first Dondang Sayang performance, by Francis Hogan who looked nothing like a Mister in his Baju Panjang. Reggie Ismail, a.k.a Bibik Sambal Belachan, did a great job with ice breaking games to involve the audience. I especially liked the part where three mature men dressed up in kebaya's;

they really stole the show that evening.

For me, the one moment that stood out was when the whole room sang Burong Kaka Tua? together. It was as if everyone remembered all at the same time of a by gone era. I learnt that song when I was little girl in Primary School. But then again, didn't all of us? That moment was magical as it brought about a flood of happy memories.

As the night progressed, the only few acts that seemed interesting at first soon became a little monotonous for me. I did not understand the Baba Malay and I got tired and/or embarrassed asking for translations after awhile. But all in all, everyone seemed to be having a good time.

Through the eyes of a New Phoenix, it was truly a night of 'firsts'. But definitely not my last.

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# THANKSGIVING ALTARS TO HEAVEN

By Ee Sin Soo

ON Aug 27, I travelled to Malacca for a special purpose - the 70th birthday celebration of Cedric Tan's father, Mr Tan Beng Tee. It was an auspicious occasion, and a privilege indeed for me to witness the setting up of the altars associated with the Peranakan Taoist tradition of the "Naik Sam Kai" practice for "Sembahyang Ti Kong" - a thanksgiving dedication to the Jade Emperor for birthdays, weddings, the Chinese New Year and other feast days, known for its elaborate preparation and presentation.

The taxi chugged along busy Jalan Tengker, pulling up in front of the Tan family's centuries-old ancestral house - all decked up in Malaccan Peranakan regal finery thanks to a recent makeover. Two large cylindrical family lanterns hung from each side of the house above the windows with illustrations of the colourful Eight Immortals, swaying in the soft breeze, proudly bearing the Tans' name. The globular Tien Teng lantern hung just above the front door, in the position of honour between the family lanterns, beckoning me into the house.

I greeted the spritely Mr Tan Beng Tee, the birthday boy smartly dressed in his Sunday best,

with "panjang panjang umur". Wearing a big smile, he showed me proudly into his home.

Stepping into the main hall was like travelling back in time. Before my eyes stood the altar tables, dressed in identical, exquisite table valances (tok wee), heavily embroidered with designs of the Eight Immortals and dragons. The

carved dragon legs of the altars bore their weight regally from behind the skirtings.

The first special two-tier high altar, representing heaven, earth and man, faced the main door, open to the heavens and stacked on a one-and-a-half-foot high brown and gold perforated table stand, with each leg resting on gold joss paper. It was evident that a strict protocol had to be observed, hence the floor was scrubbed sparkling clean for this occasion.

The table stand heaved under the weight of this sacred altar, elevated to be as near to heaven as possible, laden with offertory food and fruits with their many religious symbols in yellow Nonya porcelain ware.

Sticks of carved honeyed papaya slices (the favourite fruit of Ti Kong) with eagle-claw motifs interspersed with candied limes, rising majestically from the mandatory black and



Sam Kai altar at the Tan house, Malacca





(Left & right) Household altar, (centre) Sam Kai altar and accompanying second altar table

gold lacquered chernab taking centrestage. Large crystal glass oil lamps on each side housed playful flickering flames. A low barrel-shaped porcelain urn of smouldering compressed joss ingots, oranges, gangly red candles, pretty flowers, wine, mee suah and rock sugar completed the picture.

Under the table stand, away from prying eyes, was a strategically placed clay brazier with heat from the charcoal embers, slowly releasing aromatic stangee (a loose and damp combination of aromatic wood, essential oils, sugar, scraped sugar cane) through the perforation into the sultry Malaccan heat, attacking the senses insidiously.

The second altar - a lower, adjoining one just behind the high altar - held pears, buah lai, a pomelo, oranges, apples, pisang rajah, sugar cane sticks bound with delicate scallop-edged paper cuttings, and a porcelain urn holding lighted incense sticks and sweets (teh liau) (all symbolising fertility and sweetness).

Tall red candles stood at attention on each side of this altar, as well as on the altar with balancing effigies of Chinese saints clasping the sides and helping to lift the glowing flames into the hall and onward to the heavens.

The household altar dedicated to the Lord Buddha and Goddess of Mercy had offertory oranges and flowers. Below it was an extended altar set up to hold delicate kuih ku merah in the inside row; buah lai, grapes and pears in the next row; followed by mee suah and rock sugar; and finally cups of tea and sweets on the outside with red candles and crystal glass oil lamps on each side.

A small altar to the Earth Spirit deity sat quietly beneath the household altar.

The heartfelt thanks of the Tan family to their household deities and Ti Kong for having blessed Mr Tan Beng Tee with bountiful years while supporting him through his tribulations, floated up to the celestial realm on swirling clouds of sweet incense mixed with fragrant bunga rampay potpurri (finely sliced pandan leaves mixed with flowers, essential oil and perfume), stangee and burning gold joss paper ingots.

Such elaborate detail was reserved not just for the altars but for the party guests as well. For starters, birthday longevity mee suah and egg in rock sugar solution was served. Lunch was a nasi kemuli set meal - comprising nasi kemuli; achar; kuah heewan; udang goreng asam; sek bak; kari ayam; parcharli terung; lobak putih masak lemak; ayam goreng lada; and telur rebus. Desserts included tai bak; kuih genggang; galing galo; onde onde and fruits were juicy pineapple and bananas.

In the cool confines of the second and third halls, friends, relatives and family members wolfed down the fine food before making further preparations for the long day's celebrations. The amazing team spirit and camaraderie shown made their company and fellowship even more treasured.

Traditional instrumental seronee music played hypnotically in the background, as the halls reverberated with laughter, typical exchange of Peranakan banter and Baba Malay chatter.

If only the walls could speak, how much more would they have told of the other beautiful events that had graced this splendid house in the years gone by.

For me, I left this grand old lady, struck by the splendour of this celebration, and even more enriched by this aspect of Peranakan heritage.



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REVIEW:  
**BELOM  
 MATI  
 BELOM TAU**  
 (THE UNPREDICTABLE)

By Ee Sin Soo

**Playing to full houses, Belom Mati Belom Tau is testimony that the Peranakan wayang tradition is alive and well as the second generation of anak anak wayang carry the torch high.**

**T**he story line struck close to the audience's hearts. It was a classic case of reaping what you sow. Chit Neo (wonderfully played by GT Lye) neglects her mother-in-law, Nya Hitam, until the latter dies, only to get her just desserts when she becomes wheelchair bound and demented from the trauma of her favourite son, Beng Chye's (Frederick Soh) tragic death.

Her wealthy daughter-in-law, Imm Neo (Irene Ong), tries to push the responsibility of caring for Chit Neo to Chit Neo's equally diffident sisters-in-law, Kechik (KT) and Gek Lian (Maureen Lim), and finally decides to send Chit Neo off to the nursing home.

The more poignant moments tugged at hearts. My mother was especially touched. She had looked after my bedridden great grandmother and was convinced that GT Lye, who wrote the screenplay, had seen it all happen to understand the difficulties.

The snappy dialogue brought the house down with laughter, especially the hilarious moments when gossipy old ladies gambled with cherki cards. Star performers KT and Maureen Lim, gave a command performance as the hypocritical mourners preoccupied with Hitam's jewellery, and ever ready to cast off their "twa ha" black clothes.

Just as we wished, the play ends on a happy note. Chit Neo's filial twin son Beng Tee (also Frederick Soh) saves the day and decides to take care of her.

Who says a bad tree cannot bear good fruit?

Belom Mati Belom Tau played at the Victoria Theatre from 9 to 10 September 2005.

## ARE DIAMONDS FOREVER AND ALWAYS?

Further musings on GSA's recent production

By Ong Poh Neo

**W**hile exaggerated body movements characterise the bibiks and nyonyas of today's theatre, director GT Lye's performance excelled in a maturity of both body and facial expressions. Nimble and expressive in movement, graceful yet restrained, GT (as he is known to friends) conveyed highs and lows successfully, close to mastering the Baba art with a performance unmatched by the supporting cast.

His face clearly conveyed the range of emotions of a manipulative, greedy, cunning yet sometimes charming daughter-in-law, and of the notoriously doting, gushing mother of three sons in their usual low-key anaemic Baba roles. Not so traditional is her portrayal of the rare nyonya mother-in-law who bestows favour bought by a confident wealthy daughter-in-law and who deludes herself into thinking that she will be well-looked after in her dotage by the younger woman.

Sisters-in-law KT and Maureen Lim complimented each other well. KT, best identified by his crackling 'keropok' (when munched) voice, crunched his way through to the accompaniment of his exaggerated finger, hand and arm movements and succeeded in entertaining the audience with his interpretation of the highly nervous, volatile daughter-in-law, robbed of her rightful inheritance but who triumphed in the end with the recovery of a single diamond bracelet dropped by GT's character who had convincingly, and gracefully, succumbed to a major stroke. The indomitable amah, played by celebrity star of the TV series *Ways of The Matriarch* Shirley Tay, shone fleetingly in a role which demands, traditionally, a bigger voice, more exaggerated verbal and bodily movements. Here we see an interesting different perception in the world of theatre in a quieter, non-comic portrayal of domestic help in the well-to-do families of the past, a portrayal which served its purpose. It was a perfect foil to the totally dominant role of GT's matriarch.

Scripting was commendable. The electronic translation screened was lamentable.

Gunong Sayang Association could perhaps explore the real world. Bibiks and nyonyas in current productions seem perpetually attired to the nines. The amah is decked out in sparkling diamond earrings while bustling around at work. All bibiks and nyonyas, whether at home, around or on their way to the (wet) market are tirelessly attired in their best, with heavily embroidered kebayas and glamorous baju panjangs even for the mourning period. It's diamonds galore from start to finish.

However, although it was a diamond-studded theatrical world very well received by the predominantly Peranakan audience, are we to presume the Peranakan ladies of yesterday did not know how to relax or (did not want to) dress down for appropriate occasions?





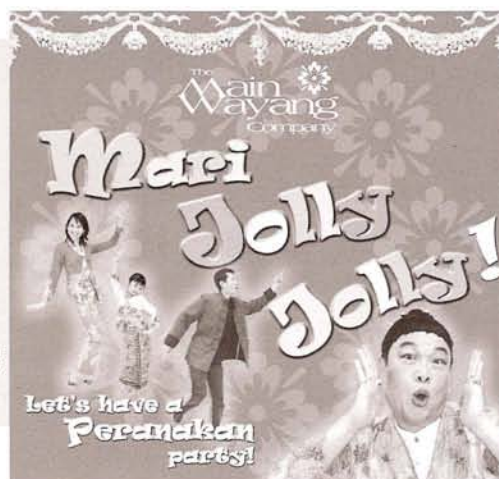
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**T**he grand opening on 18 November at Millenia Walk will launch a colourful cornucopia of Peranakan music, fashion and comedy sketches, all set against the background of our now well-established Craft and Food Fair.

On 21 November, a fashion show featuring modern interpretations of batik wear from top Malaysian designers will be held in conjunction with the launch of a coffee-table book, "Batik Inspirations".

Besides skits highlighting the Peranakan lifestyle and traditions, a wedding procession typical of a traditional Peranakan Wedding will be staged.

## **Other Highlights**

### **18th Baba Convention: Raising the Phoenix**

24 – 26 November, Convention Hotel, RELC International Hotel

This convention consists of seminars on the preservation and revival of the culture. The keynote seminar, "Menimpi Menjadi Betul" or Dreams Becoming a Reality, will examine the steps taken to enliven the rich heritage of the Peranakans. Those with an intellectual or sociological interest in the Peranakan psyche will find insights aplenty. Of course, it is also a get-together for the Baba Nonya of Malacca, Penang, Phuket and Singapore.

### **105th Anniversary Annual Dinner & Dance: Baba Las Vegas!**

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The theme Baba Las Vegas aims to take a light-hearted stab at our soon-to-materialize local casinos and integrated resorts. Join in the extravagant entertainment by playing Baba Roulette, Cheeky Cherki, BiBik's Mahjong, 21 and many more. Also, look out for the exotic 'integrated' cabaret show!

### **Hotel and Food Promotions**

Hotel Phoenix and Furama Hotel will feature a variety of activities showcasing Peranakan cuisine. These will cover special lunches and dinners, cooking workshops, and even special Peranakan-inspired Christmas dishes!

### **Events @ Asian Civilisations Museum**

**27 November**

Activities include a children's workshop on making selected Peranakan crafts, an interactive play, food and craft fair. Enjoy choral performances by The Peranakan Association and Gunong Sayang.

Access [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg) or call tel: 6255 0704 for more details and registration.



# A TWIST OF FATE

In the tradition of Agatha Christie and the great "whodunits" of the 1930s,

**A Twist of Fate is a delicious comedy of twists and turns, false clues and dastardly deeds, set against the backdrop of a Peranakan family in Singapore.**

**V**oted Best Musical of 1997 by The Straits Times, the Singapore Repertory Theatre brings back by popular demand, A Twist of Fate, the original murder-mystery musical-comedy to be staged at the Esplanade Theatre.

Dark and stormy nights, midnight rendezvous, an inconvenient murder or two, and memorable tunes by our very own Peranakan Dick Lee, make this an entertaining, suspense-filled evening at the theatre.

In 1917 a baby is abandoned on the steps of the famous Raffles Hotel. A childless English couple finds the crying infant and sails away to England with the child. 20 years on she uncovers a secret that leads her to Singapore and into a web of conspiracy, deceit and love. Meanwhile, the house of Lim Chin Boon is in turmoil; the dying Master Lim receives a letter from a young lady who could well be his long-lost granddaughter; or is she part of an elaborate plot to steal his wealth?

The musical features an outstanding cast from around the world. Season runs from 18 November to 4 December, 2005. Tickets at \$38 - \$88 from SISTIC at 6348 5555 or [www.sistic.com](http://www.sistic.com).



A big welcome to our new members:

- |                       |                             |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Miss Bau Huey Rem  | 5. Ms Bibiana Lee Yu Ling   |
| 2. Mr Chong Kwee Seng | 6. Ms Patricia Quah Li Hwee |
| 3. Mr Kwa Chong Guan  | 7. Mr Tan Ban Soon          |
| 4. Mrs Nelly Kwa      | 8. Mr Wong Hon Khuan        |

Our sympathies to the families of the following members who have passed on:

1. Mdm Nancy Ang
2. Mr Goh Kheng Chong
3. Hj Abdul Hamid Bin Hj Ahmad Shah

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Peranakan Association would like to thank the following organisations and individuals for supporting the various events of the Peranakan Festival:

### PERANAKAN FESTIVAL SUPPORTERS

Asian Civilisations Museum  
Furama Hotel  
Gunong Sayang Association  
Hotel Phoenix  
Millenia Walk  
OG  
Singapore Tourism Board

### Peranakan Festival Organising Committee

Alan Koh (Chairperson)  
Gavin Ooi (Vice Chairman)  
Lim Geok Huay (Advisor)  
Peter Wee (Advisor)  
S J Beers (Secretary)  
Christopher Tay (Treasurer)  
Albert Chan (GSA)  
G T Lye (GSA)  
Victor Goh (GSA)  
Emeric Lau (Publicity)  
Chan Eng Thai (Baba Convention)  
Bebe Seet (Dinner & Dance)  
Peter Wee (Food & Craft Fair)  
Irene Ooi (Food & Craft Fair)  
Peter Lee (Exhibition & Information)  
George Suah (Museum events)  
Mark Lionel Tay (Production)  
Teemedia (Design & Artwork)  
Koh Kee Gay (Coordinator)

### Baba Las Vegas Sponsors

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House of Cheongsam  
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Neptune Theatre Restaurant  
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The Blue Ginger Restaurant  
Trang Boelan  
The Whole Earth Restaurant

### Baba Las Vegas

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Alvin Yapp (Entertainment, MC)

### Baba Convention

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Peter Wee (Advisor)  
Peter Lee (Seminar)  
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Mabel Long (Hospitality)  
Gavin Ooi (Entertainment)  
Claire Seet (Production & Design)



The gateway to paradise...

Pictures courtesy of Le Meridien Angkor



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## Christmas blessings from PeraMakan...



**PeraMakan**  
92

*Traditional & Contemporary Peranakan Cuisine*



92 Joo Chiat Road Singapore 427386 Tel: 63457565 Fax: 63450989

*Good food cooked with love...*

*This Christmas, bless your friends and customers with food baskets filled with traditional food cooked with love from PeraMakan or simply visit our restaurant for a hearty meal!*

*Braised or Roast Itik Sio with gravy and Nyonya Salad*

*Succulent Roast Chicken – your choice of Ayam Sio, Ayam Panggang or Ayam Risa Risa*

*Braised or Roast Pork Ribs – your choice of Penang Nyonya sauce, Babi Pongtay, Babi Chin, Babi Assam or simply honey-baked!*

*Traditional Roast Turkey with Chestnut or Mushroom stuffing and Roast Potatoes.*

*Honey-baked Ham with the Chef's own Nyonya pineapple sauce*



Your orders will be beautifully wrapped in a gift hamper with Christmas ribbons & trimmings.



# Baba LAS VEGAS



THE  
PERANAKAN  
ASSOCIATION  
SINGAPORE

