



APRIL-JUNE 2007
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the peranakan



Jewellery

*The allure of vintage,
the glamour of the new!*



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Low Whee Hoon

Claire Seet

Ian Yap

Alvin Yapp

CONTRIBUTORS

Chan Eng Thai

Noreen Chan

Norman Cho

Ee Sin Soo

Angeline Kong

Emeric Lau

Christopher Lim

Ong Poh Neo

Tan Kuning

Cynthia Wee-Hoefer

Maurice Wee

PUBLISHED BY

The Peranakan Association

Raffles City, PO Box 1640

Singapore 911755

Tel: 6255 0704

DESIGNED BY

Ian Yap & Michelle Yap

www.tigertoothdesign.com

PRINTED BY

Renown Print Services

Johnson Tan

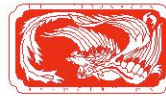
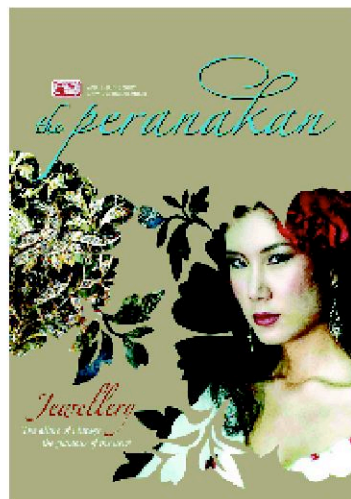
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Alvin Yapp: 9338 2234

MICA (P) 197/08/2006

Issue Date: 14/08/2006

Expiry Date: 13/08/2007



THE
PERANAKAN
ASSOCIATION
SINGAPORE

APRIL - JUNE 2007
www.peranakan.org.sg

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THE ART OF SPENDING

From May the whole country will go into a 2-month frenzy with the **Singapore Shopping Festival (25 May – 22 July)**. In sympathy with this national mood of self-indulgence, *The Peranakan* devotes this quarter's issue to our favourite luxury — jewellery! We look at traditions as well as contemporary applications. On heritage, Norman Cho recalls personal memories of family heirlooms, while Tan Kuning muses on the subject through the wise counsel of traditional *pantons* (poems). This issue also presents a practical guide to Peranakan jewels and techniques.

For the very first time, we feature a fashion special, spread over six pages, focusing on the craftsmanship of Singapore's only producer of fine, contemporary Peranakan-inspired jewels in gold, diamond and other precious stones. We also showcase the creativity of the cast of our recent Youth Group stage production, *Being and Becoming*, who present contemporary ways to wear Peranakan jewellery.

This issue is also a treasure trove of information and ideas. Dr Noreen Chan pays tribute to perhaps the Queen of Peranakan dishes — the *popiah*. As Vesak Day approaches, Cynthia Wee-Hoefer highlights a little-known aspect of Peranakan history — the patronage of one of the earliest Sinhalese Buddhist temples in Singapore by a generous Nyonya. Ee Sin Soo visits an important Penang nunnery and together with Christopher Lim, reports on the Khoo clan festivities in Penang.

The huge number of international events we have listed — in Malacca, Penang, Singapore and Manila — demonstrates the vibrancy of the culture and our community! One of the highlights for the Association was our choir Peranakan Voices'

performance before President S R Nathan and Mrs Nathan at the Istana annual staff gathering on 9 March.

To prove Peranakans aren't just about self-indulgence, we are happy to boast that six of our members have been spending lots of money — on charity. They were presented with Patron of Heritage awards in April, acknowledging their philanthropy towards heritage projects (see pg. 32).

On another take on the art of spending, the various working committees of The Peranakan Association comprise only of volunteers who spend their precious free time on finding ways to preserve and promote our heritage. As for the magazine, all contributions from writers, editorial and advertising teams are pure labours of love. Almost all have busy full-time jobs, some run their own businesses — among them are doctors, graphic designers, an accountant, oil company director, even a pastor. Although pay is being promoted as the key to progress, it's nice to believe passion is a better motivation.

Most importantly, this quarter we celebrate several important occasions: Cheng Beng (5 April), Good Friday (6 April) Hud Cho Seh (birthday of Guan Yin, 6 April), Easter Sunday (8 April), Vesak Day (31 May), Kueh Chang Festival (19 June), and the Summer Solstice (21 June).

The Peranakan Association conveys its best wishes to members and friends during this very festive season.

Peter Lee

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My grandmother and her English-pound gold pendant.

PUSAKA – PERANAKAN HEIRLOOMS

Useful tips for young collectors

By Norman Cho

Whenever the Si-Kee (Death Anniversary) of my paternal grandmother approaches, sweet memories come flooding back to my mind. I vividly remember that two years before her demise, she handed me a small toffee tin box that contained what was left of her jewellery after the ravages of the Japanese Occupation.

"Ini pusaka lu. Kasi lu buat tanda mata. Simpan, jangan sekali jual." ('This is your heirloom. It is for you to remember me by. Keep it, don't ever sell it.'). I was her favorite grandchild. She had entrusted me with all her valuables and assigned me to distribute them according to her wishes, after she passed on.

Pusaka – What Is It?

Pusaka is the Baba Malay term for heirloom. Many a time, the word conjures up images of priceless treasures. Endless feuds over heirlooms have been known to rip families apart. However, an heirloom is not always something of great monetary value as conventional wisdom would want us to believe. It may be something of sentimental value, inherited from past generations. It

can be an expensive *kerosang* or an equally priceless *batu lesong* and *anak lesong* (mortar and pestle) that grandmother lovingly prepared her *rempah* (condiments) with.

To me an heirloom is something sentimental that transcends time and unites us with its past owners, usually family members. Many Peranakans are still surrounded by a bounty of objects that qualify as heirlooms.

Why Keep It?

An heirloom is a gentle reminder of our roots — who we are and where we come from. A pair of *kasot manek* (beaded slippers) may remind us that we are Peranakan and that we have a unique cultural identity. An impressive *kerosang belian* (diamond brooch) reminds us of the material success of our forefathers.

An heirloom also reunites us with precious memories of our ancestors. A set of cake moulds may trigger sweet memories of a mother who toiled lovingly at the kitchen just before each New Year to create mouth-watering *kueh-kueh* for the family.

To hold on to an heirloom is a wonderful experience!

My Experience

In my opinion, the most precious heirlooms anyone can have are photographs. They not only show us what our ancestors looked like, but also their lifestyles. They provide clues to their taste in clothes, their favourite hobbies, picnic venues, friends, etc.

Over the years, I have acquired a vast quantity of family photographs, and derived great joy from not only seeking to learn more about my ancestors but also from being able to identify the objects featured in the photographs.

Poring through the photographs with a magnifying glass, I have been able to detect items that are sometimes still being used at home, and therefore also to date the objects from the date of the photographs.

I have a fondness for acquiring items of clothes and the matching accessories as keepsakes. If I have a picture of my grandmother in a *kebaya* or *sarong* that I know still exists, I will set it aside as a memento.

It is not difficult to acquire items that enable you to define your family history. Just ask for them nicely and chances are that you will walk away with an heirloom or two. Have a pair of keen eyes and pure intentions ...

Grandma's Pusaka

Grandma left most of her important jewellery to me ... I wonder why ... Maybe it was a way of showing how much she loved me ... Maybe she knew that I had a deep appreciation for them ... Or maybe she knew that I was the only one in the family who would cling on to them with fond memories of her ...

What could a Baba do with the jewellery? A Nonya would gladly show them off at social events. No point consigning them to the cupboard to gather dust! Well, this 21st century Baba will certainly not be out-done by Nonyas. I have devised creative uses for them!

Wearing heirloom jewellery allows me to showcase my culture and remember my beloved grandmother. I have converted her ear studs and gold buttons into cufflinks, and suspended her pendants on trendy leather strings. Her *kerosangs* have been detached as lapel-pins. Gold and silver belts with their showy buckles have been worn with denim jeans. Intricate key-holders have become quirky pendants.

Who says jewellery is meant only for the Nonyas? With a little creativity, the Babas can have fun with it too! ✨

My great grandmother and the batik sarong she wore on her 81st birthday.



AT THE PARTIES

By Tan Kuning

Most of the *pantons* sung had romantic themes (*panton kaseh*) and themes about deeds of kindness (*panton budi*) or any other topics that came to the minds of the singers.

There is a beautiful Malay *panton* about Peranakan girls which runs like this:

**Anak dara dua sepasang,
Pakay baju pakay kerosang.
Sebijik nanas, sebijik pisang.
Belom tau jerki musang.**

Glamorous ladies walking in a pair,
Show off their dresses decked with brooches.
A pineapple and a banana are in despair,
Which one the cunning fox snatches?

There are *pantons* that deal with the philosophy of life. The themes could be on wealth, morality, kindness, gratitude and any other aspects of life as illustrated below:

A Moral Commandment
**Kulit lembu chelop sama,
Mari di buat tapak kasot.
Harta dunia jangan tamak,
Kalu mati tidak di-ikot.**

Cow hides we have to treat,
For the making of our shoes.
Worldly possessions do not greed,
To death it does not follow.

Disappointed Love
**Kelaut menabor bijan,
Kedarat menabor padi.
Hajat hati mengambil intan,
Intan tersimpan di dalam peti.**

He tries to sow sesame seeds in the ocean,
He tries to sow padi seeds in the field.
He yearns for a glittering diamond,
Alas! In a box it is safely sealed.

Wealth is Ephemeral
**Anak merak di kampung China,
Charek makan di kepala titi,
Emas perak kebesaran dunia,
Budi yang baik membawak mati.**

A peacock in a Chinese village,
Strayed at the head of a bridge.
Gold and silver is a worldly prestige
Deeds of kindness are brought along to the grave.

Reference:

R.J. Wilkinson and R.O. Winstedt, *Pantun Melayu, Singapore, 1957.*



In the days of old, on grand and joyous occasions like birthday and wedding parties it was customary for Peranakan ladies to put on their best dresses, be they the *baju panjang* or the *kebaya*, and at the same time show off their jewellery (*barang intan belian*). The norm was to wear three diamond brooches (*tiga bijik kerosang belian*), a pair of diamond ear studs (*kerabu belian*), diamond bracelets (*gelang belian*) or gold bangles (*gelang emas*) and several diamond rings (*chinchin belian*). Diamond lockets were meant for younger ladies. Roving eyes searched for the biggest *kerosang* to admire! Whether they were made from *intan* (rose cut diamonds) or *belian* (brilliant cut diamonds), it was a joy to indulge in comparing the jewels worn. Close relatives and friends, regularly invited to the same party annually, looked forward to admiring familiar faces wearing their *barang barang intan belian*.

After dinner there would be singing of *panton* to *dondang sayang* and *ronggeng* music, which a group of professional Malay musicians were called upon to provide. The band consisted of a violinist, a gong beater, a *rebana* player with at least two professional singers. With much enthusiasm individual guests would join in singing together with the professional singers. There would be a handful of *panton* experts, men and women, trying to pitch their skills against one another.

GLOSSARY

OF PERANAKAN JEWELLERY TERMS

By Peter Lee

anting-anting pendant earrings
anting-anting kemanteng SEE
anting-anting olek
anting-anting olek pendant earrings
 with diamonds specially for
 weddings
anting-anting panjang drop earrings
 (1)

butang button (2)
butang baju pendek/dalam collar
 stud (for the *baju dalam*)

batu gem stone
batu ceylon paste
batu delima ruby
batu yakob/yakut paste used as a
 substitute for intan

belian brilliant-cut diamond
belian pontianak old mine cut
 diamond from the Pontianak mines
 in Kalimantan

chiam mah (Penang) hairpin

chinchin ring
chinchin belah rotan 10-carat gold
 ring band
chinchin buah kana marquise
 shaped ring (3)
chinchin kahwen wedding ring
chinchin lapchai rings exchanged
 during the wedding *lapchai*
 ceremony
chinchin leret ring band
chinchin mata satu solitaire ring
chinchin tunang engagement ring
chinchin wajek diamond-shaped
 ring

chochok sanggol hairpin
chochok sanggol ibu the biggest of
 the set of three hairpins
chochok sanggol kemanteng a set
 of 155 hairpins worn by the bride
chochok sanggol nombor dua/liga
 the second and third hairpin
chochok sanggol tiga batang set
 of three hairpins (4)

dokoh full bridal necklace

gelang bangle (5,6)
gelang jingle SEE **gelang tengkat**
gelang kaki anklet
gelang rantay chain bracelet
gelang tangan bracelet, bangle
gelang tengkat bangle worn in
 numbers

hongtok/tongtok phoenix hairpin worn by
 the bride, symbolising the Emperor's
 consent for her to be dressed as a
 queen for the day

intan diamond chiffries ('chips'); rose-cut
 diamonds

kerabu earstuds (7)

kerosang brooch used to fasten the *baju
 panjang* or *kebaya* (worn as a set
 of three brooches)
kerosang ali-ali (Malacca) same as
kerosang serong (8)
kerosang bintang star-shaped
kerosang (9)
kerosang bulat round *kerosang*,
 worn with the **kerosang serong**,
 or with a middle *kerosang* in the
 shape of an insect, or a lozenge with
 floral motifs (10)
kerosang ibu the largest *kerosang*
 in a set, worn as the topmost brooch
kerosang kueh tair set of three
kerosang bulat
kerosang rantay leaf or lozenge
 shaped *kerosang* connected to
 each other by a fine chain (11)
kerosang serong a paisley-shaped
kerosang worn as a **kerosang ibu**,
 together with two **kerosang
 bulat** (8)
kerosang tengah the middle
kerosang, which sometime may
 have motifs of an insect or a Buddha
 hand citron
kerosang tuaha silver *kerosang* with
 pearls worn during mourning periods

korek kuping sanggol nyonya hairpin in
 the shape of an ear-pick (4)
anak korek kuping the two smaller
 hairpins of the set of three used by
 a Singapore and Malacca Nyonya
ibu korek kuping the largest hairpin
 of the set of three used by a
 Singapore and Malacca Nyonya

kor tua (Penang) belt (14)
kor tua tau (Penang) belt buckle
 (15, 16)

lian (Penang) chain
liantay (Penang) necklace
chewlian (Penang) bracelet
kopilian (Penang) long, gold bead
 necklace

loket pendant, locket (12)

mair/mas gold
mas chelop fake gold
mas merah gold that has been
 stained red, a Malay technique
 often seen in early Nonya jewellery
 and plated wedding objects
mas pavn gold from melted coins
mas puteh platinum or white gold
mas rendah low quality gold alloy
mas sepuluh 24 carat gold
chelop mair gold-plated

orna ayer chempaka a term describing
 the pale yellow or cape diamonds
 favoured by the Peranakans

pak sian/pueh sian wedding headband
 with the design of Eight Immortals
 and God of Longevity (13)

perak silver
perak chelop mair gold-plated silver

pending (less commonly used among
 Peranakans) belt buckle
kepala pending large belt
 buckle (15, 16)

rantay chain
rantay leher necklace

sanggol kemanteng bridal crown made
 from **chochok sanggol**

suan puay (Penang) SEE **intan**

suasa gold alloy

subang (Penang) earrings

tali kendek belt (14)

tali pinggang belt (14)
kepala tali pinggang belt buckle
 (15, 16)

TECHNIQUES

à jour (1) same as *ajouré* work,
 (2) same as *open setting*
ajouré work pierced or open work pattern
 cut in metal so as to show light (6)
appliqué jewellery decoration made by
 attaching elements onto a base where
 both may be of the same or different
 material (16)
claw setting a style of setting gemstones
 with encircling claw prongs, usually with
 open setting (7)
closed setting a style of setting a gemstone
 by closing the back from exposure to light
 with a thin sheet of metal foil. This is an old
 European style of setting from the 15th
 century, and functions to enhance the
 brilliance of stones, which at that time
 were often poorly cut or had poor clarity.
 (8, 10)
filigree jewellery decoration made with
 fine metal wire (5)
granulation jewellery decoration made
 with fine metal grain
millegrain or **grain setting** a style of setting
 a gemstone with three or more minute
 metal grains or beads
open setting a style of setting a gemstone
 where the back of the gemstone is left
 open and exposed to light (9)
repoussé jewellery decoration made
 by embossing, punching or hammering
 designs in relief on the reverse to
 create a decoration on the front of the
 jewel. Often repoussé work is enhanced
 by chasing and engraving on the front.
 (15)*



The New Peranakan Jewellery

*The only atelier producing
fine, hand-made
Peranakan jewellery in
Singapore,
Foundation Jewellers
has taken this
heritage to its next
level, with its inspiring,
attention-grabbing sparklers
and bold, unconventional
designs.*

Location: Baba House, courtesy of NUS Museum.

(Right)

Bird motif kerosang/brooch in gold with rose-cut diamonds. Floral pendent earrings in gold with brilliant and rose-cut diamonds. All by Foundation Jewellers.

Vintage white organza kebaya embroidered with roses, Katong Antique House.

White cotton camisole, white linen drawstring pants, red taffeta tie-up wedges, Island Shop.

(Far right, top)

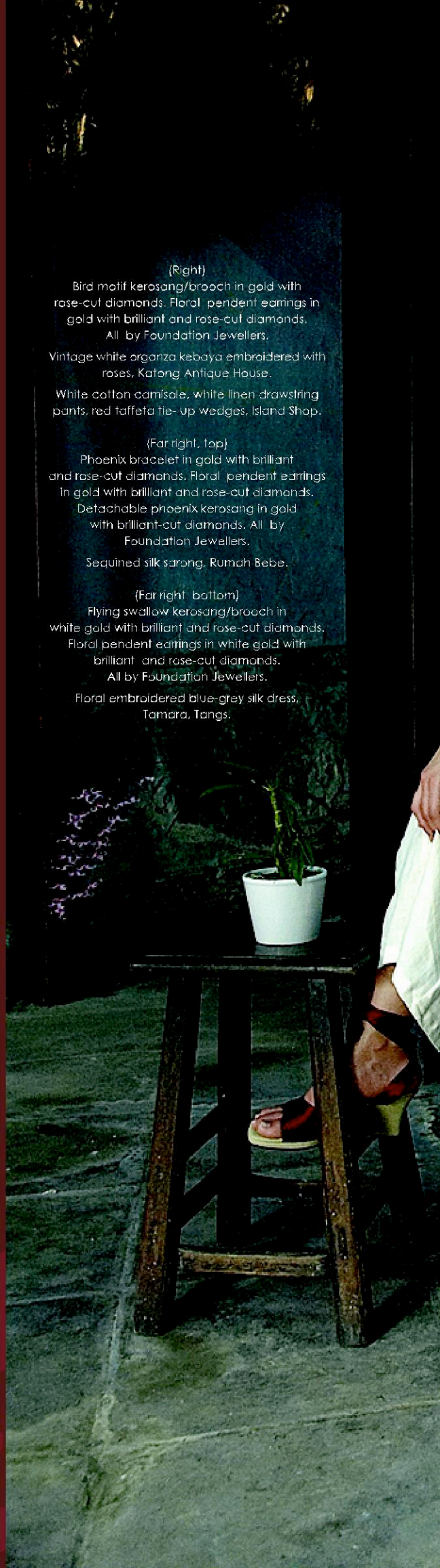
Phoenix bracelet in gold with brilliant and rose-cut diamonds. Floral pendent earrings in gold with brilliant and rose-cut diamonds. Detachable phoenix kerosang in gold with brilliant-cut diamonds. All by Foundation Jewellers.

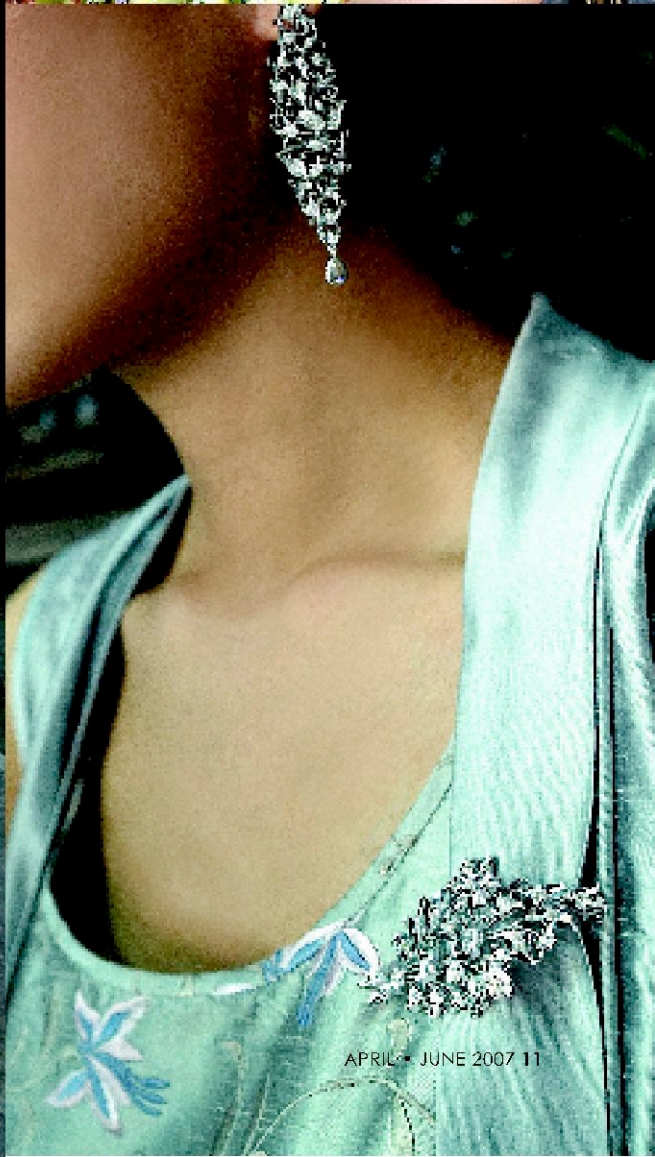
Sequined silk sarong, Rumah Bebe.

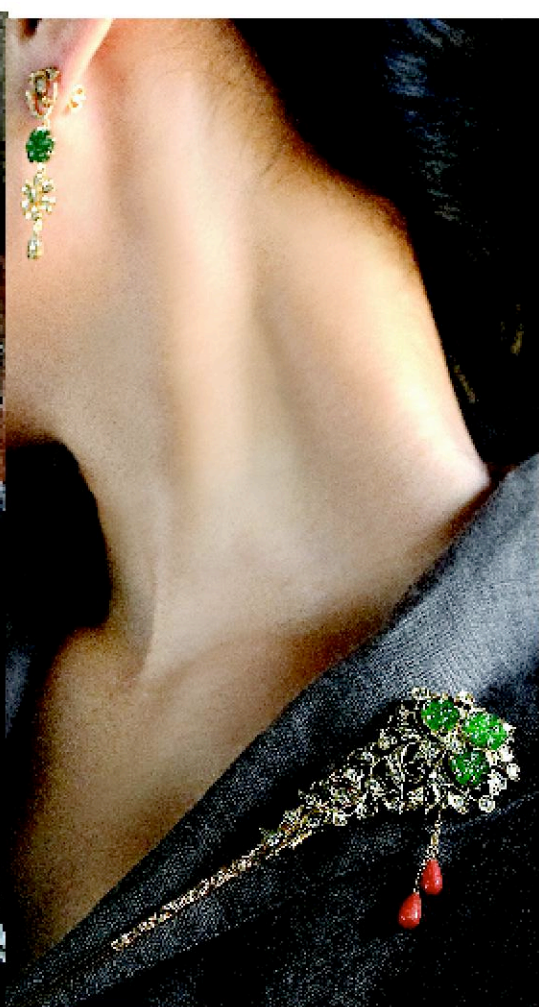
(Far right, bottom)

Flying swallow kerosang/brooch in white gold with brilliant and rose-cut diamonds. Floral pendent earrings in white gold with brilliant and rose-cut diamonds. All by Foundation Jewellers.

Floral embroidered blue-grey silk dress, Tamara, Tangs.









(This page)

Floral necklace in gold with brilliant and rose-cut diamonds. Centre panel can be detached to form a brooch or pendant, and matching earrings.

All by Foundation Jewellers.

Olive green embroidered kebaya sequined silk sarong and "manek" beaded slippers. Rumah Bebe.

(Facing Page)

Top, left:

Floral pendant earrings in gold with brilliant-cut diamonds and cabochon coral drops. Foundation Jewellers.

Top, centre and right:

Hairpin inspired brooch in gold with brilliant and rose-cut diamonds and Burmese jadeite, and matching pendant earrings.

All by Foundation Jewellers.

Brown linen smock top, Island Shop. Crepe silk scarf, Rumah Bebe.

Bottom:

Demi-pareure of flying phoenix earrings, ring and detachable kerosangs in gold with brilliant-cut diamonds. All by Foundation Jewellers.

Vintage organza embroidered kebaya, Katong Antique House.



(This page)

Flying swallow kerosang/pendant in gold with brilliant cut diamonds. Pendant hoop earrings in gold with brilliant-cut diamonds. Phoenix bracelet in gold with brilliant-cut diamonds.

All by Foundation Jewellers.

Vintage lavender organza kebaya, Katang Antique House.

Steel grey Thai silk pants, Tamara, Tangs.

(Facing page)

Top:

Deer kerosang/brooch in gold with brilliant-cut diamonds and matching pendant earrings and bracelet.

All by Foundation Jewellers.

White cotton camisole and a large-weave knitted top, Island Shop.

Vintage cotton batik sarong, Katang Antique House.

Bottom:

Floral spray kerosang in gold with Burmese jadeite cabochons and brilliant-cut diamonds. Each detachable to form individual brooch or pendant.

Flying swallow ring in gold with brilliant-cut diamonds.

All by Foundation Jewellers.

Embroidered orange kebaya, Rumah Bebe.

Model: Jo Cho, Carrie Models

Photography: Colin Goh

Art direction: Ian Yap

Styling: Carol Kwan

Makeup: Cecilia Chng, Vive Salon

Hair: Alester Tay, Vive Salon

Location: Baba House, 157 Neil Road.





BABA BLING-BLING:

Wham-glam-thank-you-gran!

Cast members of the youth group's drama, **Being and Becoming**, get sassy with gran's gems

By Emeric Lau

Like the feuding mother-daughter pair in *Being and Becoming*, it can be difficult to find common ground between the old and the young when it comes to dressing up. There's always the risk of looking like a racial harmony day celebrant when one chooses to don traditional garb. Here, we reveal the secrets of channelling some nyonya panache without looking like a nyonya from the past.



"To complete the look, be sure to exude an air of unshakable confidence. Now you're all set to seal that deal."

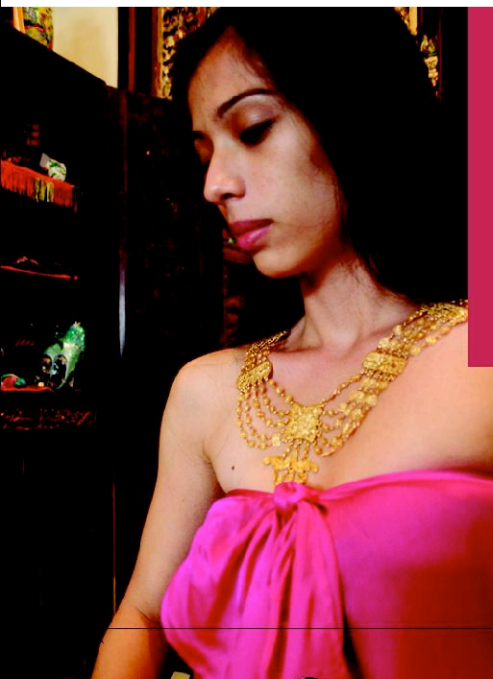


Work Wear: Bellians in the Boardroom

The key to dressing for the office is to maintain an unmistakably modern silhouette. Peranakan jewellery can then be added to personalise the outfit. Even the most banal boardroom suits are instantly transformed into bold power statements with the addition of a couple of (or just one!) traffic-stopping pieces of heritage bling.

Simple tailored coordinates in a single shade make excellent backgrounds on which to pin that fabulous brooch granny bequeathed you. Don't be afraid to challenge convention by wearing a piece in a different manner from which it was intended. If in doubt, just consult the mirror before stepping out.

Belts, brooches, bracelets, anklets – even a ring worn against the knot of a skinny tie – there's lots to wear and lots of ways to wear them! And if you're travelling light on a business trip, changing accessories is the best way to refresh an outfit you have to don every other day.



"The jewellery should enhance, not compete..."



Evening Wear: Razzle Dazzle 'em

Evening wear is a major stumbling block for many Nyonyas. After viewing photographs of an Association event, a good friend quipped, "I see that colour is for parrots and Peranakans!" Peranakans harbour a morbid fear of white space. Minimalism is absolute anathema to our sense of aesthetics. Dating a Nyonya is akin to dating a Christmas tree – albeit a very vivacious one!

When dressing for the evening, discernment is key. Match an elegant outfit in a solid colour with a few elaborate pieces to create a sensation. But aim for individualism rather than eccentricity.

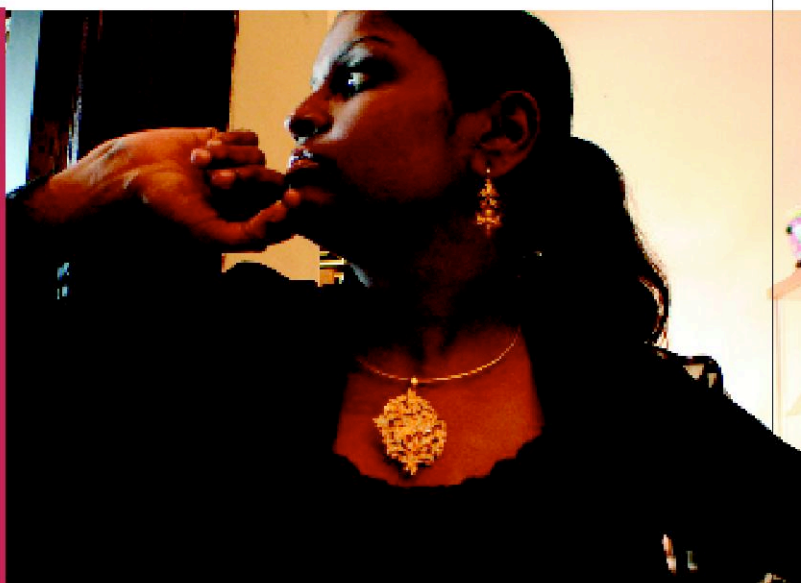
Dramatic gold necklaces contrast well with clear skin and lend focus to fabrics that are voluminous or translucent. The jewellery should enhance, not compete with the rest of the outfit for attention.

Finally, Nyonyas should note Coco Chanel's mantra, "Always take off one piece of jewellery before you leave the house to avoid looking overdone!"



Simple!

1. Hair pin- one side will do!
2. Kerosang - contrasts with the black outfit beautifully!
3. Bracelets galore!
4. Kasot Manek with a modern twist!



Jewellery and location: Rumah Bebe

Photos: Claire Seet

Models: Vanessa Wong, Tabitha Maitland, Kalaiselvi Grace, Emeric Lau

With special thanks to Bebe Seet of Rumah Bebe @ 113 East Coast Road for lending the jewellery and location.

PEKALONGAN PERFECTION

PETER WEE'S COLLECTION OF THE FINEST BATIK SARONGS

By Maurice Wee

Having known Peter Wee since 1981, I have observed how he has over the years painstakingly collected antique batik sarongs worn by the Peranakans. Most of these batiks were made in Pekalongan on the north coast of Java. In fact, today most Peranakan ladies are still fond of batik sarongs from this region because of their bright colour and distinctive design.

In his extensive collection he has also rare and exquisite pieces that were made in other towns along the north coast of Java such as Lasem, Cirebon and Kedungwuni. Apart from sarongs, he also collects other items made of batik, such as the *kain lepas* or *kain panjang* (long skirt cloth) *tok wi*, (altar table valance), the Javanese *gendongan* (baby-carrier cloth), *sapu tangan* (handkerchief).

In the year 2000 Peter Wee was asked to collaborate and work with Yayasan Budi Penyayang Malaysia of Kuala Lumpur, to provide the sarongs to match the *kebayas* from the collection of the late Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, wife of Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Badawi for a book entitled *The Nonya Kebaya*, which was published in 2002.

Peter's sarongs were exhibited with the late Datin Seri's *kebayas* in exhibitions in both Kuala Lumpur and Singapore (at the Asian Civilisations Museum).

The book, which has seen two editions already, showcases his best collection of batik sarongs mainly from Pekalongan. Equally charming and exquisite are the many unpublished examples from his collection that were used specifically for mourning (*tuaha*) coloured in shades of blue and sometimes of combinations of blue and green.

In 2004, he collaborated with the Apex Club of Singapore (Radin Mas) to produce a fund-raising publication,



Timeless Peranakan Legacy, which showcases exquisite pieces of batik sarongs and *kebayas* from his collection, ranging from casual daytime ensembles to formal evening versions. The book also highlights related items of the costume, such as camisoles, beaded slippers (*kasot manek*) and jewellery.

From 3 May to 9 September his sarongs will be seen in Australia when more than 60 of the late Datin Seri Endon's *kebayas* go on show at the Immigration Museum in Melbourne. The launch will be graced by the presence of the Prime Minister of Malaysia Dato' Seri Abdullah Badawi, and by the wife of the Australian Prime Minister, Mrs Janette Howard.

Peter learned to appreciate batik sarongs from his mother Josephine Tan, who has given him her finest batik sarongs. Over the years, he has expanded his collection with much enthusiasm, interest and specifically concentrates and focuses on batiks made by the Peranakan Chinese in Indonesia. Today he owns close to 200 pieces of batik sarongs, which clearly reflects the tastes of Peranakan Chinese women in the 20th century.✽

Peter Wee and Nonyas dressed in his antique sarongs and kebayas (top right). Pekalongan sarongs from Peter Wee's collection, illustrated in Timeless Peranakan Legacy (left).

■ DALAM DAPOR ■

PERFECT SKIN

Beauty is skin deep for the Peranakan popiah

By Noreen Chan

Popiah, a crepe-like pastry roll with a savoury filling akin to the spring roll, is a popular dish in Singapore and Malaysia, where it is available in fried and fresh forms. It is enjoyed in Vietnam as well, where rice paper sheets (*banh trang*) are used to wrap a variety of ingredients. The classic fresh spring roll is known as *goi cuon* and contains vermicelli, prawn, herbs (mint and basil) and spring onion. The fried version is known as *cha gio* and is normally smaller than the fresh one. Both are served with a dipping sauce.

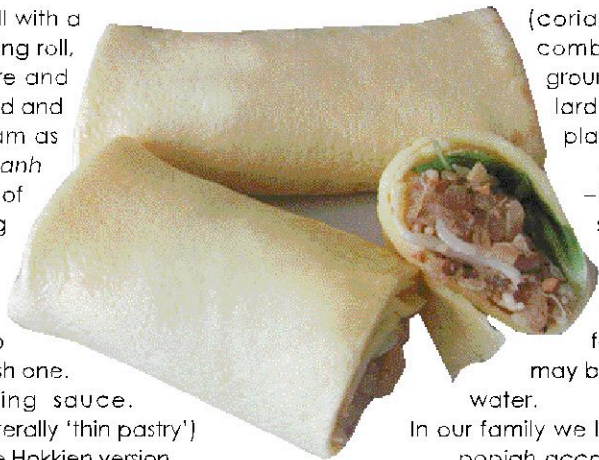
Popiah (*baobing* in Mandarin, literally 'thin pastry') is of southern Chinese origin, and the Hokkien version is the one most people recognise. The Peranakans, true to style, adapted this to create their own unique expression. The basic form has not changed – a filling of vegetables based on shredded white turnip (*bangkwang*) stewed in stock, with lettuce and a smearing of sweet sauce, garnished with egg and a variety of other ingredients, and a wrap or skin made of a thin sheet of wheat flour batter.

What probably makes a Peranakan popiah different are the presence of bamboo shoots in the filling, the addition of egg to the batter, the omission of some garnishes (such as sliced *lapcheong* or waxed sausage, and fried dried sole fish) and, in traditional families, homemade *ti chio* (sweet sauce) which itself forms the basis of an old and disappearing Malacca dish, *itek* or *ayam oong*. The sauce is made by toasting flour in a *kuali* (wok) over low heat (no oil!) until light golden, and then mixing it with water, dark soya sauce, salt and sugar until the right consistency and taste is achieved.

Purists might insist that the *bangkwang* (white turnip) be sliced by hand, but I find that a coarse grater works just as well. But it must be coarse; if grated too fine, the *bangkwang* strips will break up into pieces. It is fine to use tinned winter bamboo shoots, but these have to be cut by hand. We use the recipe from Mrs Leong Yee Soo's cookbook, modified to suit our own taste.* We tend to prepare large quantities e.g. 5kg of *bangkwang*, 3 to 4 tins of bamboo shoots, 1kg of prawns etc.; popiah is often a party dish so we want the hard work to go a long way!

If we are preparing the filling the day before, we omit the *taukua* strips; before eating, the fried pieces of *taukua* can be mixed with the filling and slowly heated up together. It is a common practice to put a small inverted bowl into the deep dish where the filling will be placed; this allows the gravy to drain to the bottom.

My family version uses finely sliced egg omelette (rather than chopped hardboiled egg as in the Hokkien version). Our ground garlic is raw – others prefer to fry theirs – and plenty of *wan sui* (coriander sprout, seldom available) or *daon ketumbair*



(coriander leaf) is a must, as is our combination garnish of fried shallots, ground roasted peanuts and diced fried lard (*bak pok*). We always serve both plain white skin and yellow egg skin.

Popiah is usually enjoyed on its own – it is a complete meal after all – but some families serve it with a 'soupy' dish like macaroni soup or rice porridge. Although largely vegetable based, it is still a fairly rich food, and to alleviate the richness it may be served with Chinese tea or ginger water.

In our family we like to joke that people tend to roll popiah according to their own body size, so my grandmother would make ones that were neat, petite and elegant, whereas I would roll ones filled to bursting! Health conscious folks might omit the skins altogether and mix the ingredients like a salad. I like to have one of each – white skin and egg skin – then see what my appetite and fancy will accommodate. My brother's record of six egg skin popiahs at one sitting stands right up there near the seventy sticks of satay in our family honour roll of big eating achievements. ✨



Egg skin for Popiah

2 cups plain wheat flour
1 cup tapioca flour
Pinch salt
1 teaspoon custard powder (optional)
3 cups water (+ up to 1/2 cup more)
3 eggs, beaten

Sift the flour together and slowly add the water, mixing well. My grandmother used to do this by hand, painstakingly dissolving the lumps with her fingers and beating the batter for 15-20 minutes. There is no need to be quite so fastidious, an ordinary whisk will do – but it is good to beat the batter well as this develops the elasticity. Add the eggs, stir well and pour the batter through a fine sieve before using. Add more water if required to get the required consistency.

Heat a non-stick pan and add a few drops of oil. Make the skins as if you are making crepes, except you only cook it on one side. Once the skin no longer sticks to the pan (test by giving the pan a gentle shake), cook for a couple of minutes more then flip the skin onto a lightly greased (or non-stick) surface to cool. I use an oiled plastic colander for this purpose. Stack on a plate and cover with a damp cloth to prevent drying out. Makes about a dozen using a 26cm pan.

• Mrs Leong Yee Soo, *The Best of Singapore Cooking*, Times Books International, Singapore, 1988. The reprints are available at leading bookshops. The recipe for popiah is on page 26.

BUDDHIST LEGACY OF A GRAND NONYA

By Cynthia Wee-Hoefer

Every Vesak Day, the throngs of devotees receiving merits at Mangala Vihara Buddhist temple, at the corner of Jalan Eunus and Sims Avenue East, are blissfully unaware of its deep Peranakan roots.

Except for the elderly members, not many know that the temple ground was a gift of the late Madam Chew Quee Neo, the only daughter of the philanthropist Chew Joo Chiat. Madam Chew's suburban parcel of land surrounded by attap huts spawned the first Theravada Buddhist temple for the English- and Malay-speaking Peranakan Chinese in Singapore in 1960.

Madam Chew was already in her 70s when she came across a young saffron-robed and shorn-headed monk from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) who was asked to conduct the funeral rites of her late husband Lee Tian Seck.

The monk MM Mahaweera impressed Madam Chew with the simplicity of the funeral service – without the typical Peranakan funeral trappings that she seemed averse to —

'hell paper' burning, clashing cymbals, minefields of taboos and customs, unfathomable Taoist prayers, among other. Through the monk's sermons (he spoke Malay, English and Hokkien) she began to understand the basic tenets of Buddhism and together with her family, embraced Theravada Buddhism.

Through generations of living away from China, many Peranakan Chinese had by the first quarter of the 20th century become unfamiliar with Chinese dialects and were becoming increasingly Western-educated. They found themselves blindly following the

rituals of Chinese culture that pivoted around the syncretic beliefs of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism without comprehending their significance. Most ended up regarding the rituals



The late Madam Chew Quee Neo Chief Benefactress of Mangala Vihara (Buddhist Temple) Her dedication to the Triple Gem has been a boon to the spread of Buddha-Dhamma in Singapore.

as superstitions and rejected them altogether.

Enter an 18-year-old Sinhalese bhikku (monk) in 1934 on his way to Thailand to train in meditation as part of his monastic discipline. On his arrival, he was asked to be the religious leader of the Sinhalese community in Singapore. His religious activities were interrupted by the Japanese Occupation, although Japanese generals also engaged his services for their own community.

So effective was the venerable monk that after the 2nd World War, he formed the Singapore Buddhist Pali

Society with a temple of its own at Outram Road. Currently, the building remains shuttered after a spell as a dance studio.

In 1952 a new temple, Sri Lankaramaya at St. Michael's Road was built with donations from wellwishers. Peranakan Chinese who previously went to Chinese-speaking temples soon joined in the Pali chanting classes and *pūja* services of the new temple.

I remember the temple from those days as a child, when it was paradoxically called the St. Michael's Road temple, because the Bibiks and Babas could not pronounce the Sinhalese name. My late parents became devoted Theravada Buddhists under the leadership of Venerable MM Mahaweera and my sister and I still follow the tenets of Buddhism while my eldest sister and my brother have become Catholics.

The overwhelming participation of the Peranakan community in a Sinhalese temple created some discontent. Disheartened by the objections of some temple elders, Venerable Mahaweera

decided to leave Singapore and continue his work in Kuala Lumpur where he had many followers too.

It was the timely intervention of Madam Chew that sealed his fate to stay on in Singapore, become its citizen and achieve a lifetime of tremendous work for another 50 years before passing away at the age of 83 with the highest title for a monk.

My father Wee Tin Guan, his best friend and neighbour Loo Boon Kwee and Tan Seng Chye and others banded behind the monk and helped found Mangala Vihara ('Temple of Blessings') as a temple, a Sunday



Peranakan families after a service at a Theravada Buddhist temple in Outram Road, 1950s. MM Mahaweera (extreme left) is seated with visiting monks from Sri Lanka.

school and a community centre for Peranakans in the East Coast area.

One of the first rules of the new temple was to establish English and Malay as the medium of instruction and sermons. The grandson of Madam Chew, Lee Kiong Loh expressed his reservations about whether a Buddhist temple in a Chinese kampong at the outskirts of a predominantly Malay area could flourish.

"Singapore's type of Buddhism is a mixture and combination of many teachings and beliefs masquerading under Buddhism. To ridicule this practice and erase all wrongful rites would meet up with hostilities," he wrote in a Mangala Vihara publication. It was said that Venerable Mahaweera visited the graveyards to personally research on the Cheng Beng ceremony carried out by the Chinese.

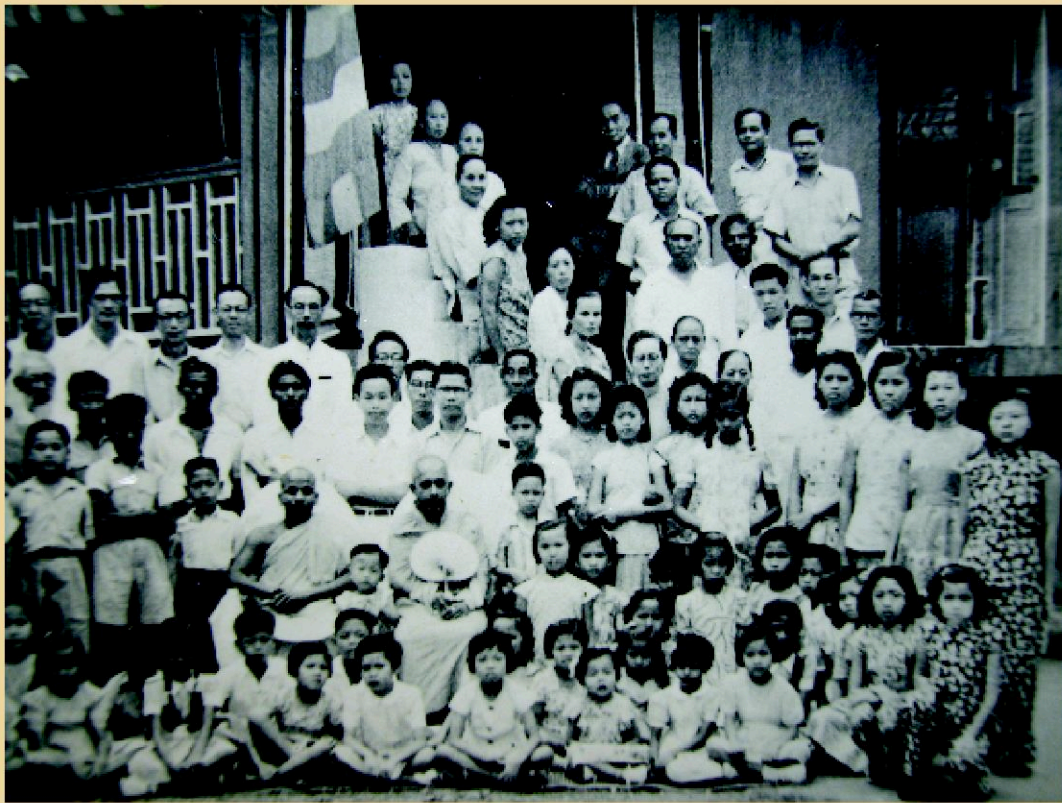
How was he to dispel the tradition of food and paper offerings, and



Mangala Vihara today, surrounded by the trappings of progress – a MRT track behind and road works on the widened Sims Avenue.

direct his followers to the true path of Theravada Buddhism? This he demonstrated by the symbolic "Transferring of Merits" rite wherein a

benefactor pours a teapot filled with water slowly into a glass placed upright in a bowl. With chanting of Pali words and conveying the wish "May



*Devotees fly the Buddhist flag outside the house of a benefactor in Katong, 1950s.
MM Mahaweera is seated on the extreme left.*

you be well and happy" to the departed, the monk convinced his flock of the simple but liberating nature of Buddhist ceremonies.

When the temple was opened on the Vesak Full Moon Day in 1960, the committee launched *dhamma* studies in English whereas the other Mahayana Buddhist temples gave classes in Chinese. The temple now offers tertiary education in Buddhist studies affiliated to the main academic institutions in Sri Lanka.

A sapling of the *mahabodhi* tree from the ancient city of Anudharapura in Sri Lanka was planted in the garden next to a silk-clad marble Buddha, serving as a landmark for passing road traffic and MRT trains.

Along with my siblings, relatives and friends, I attended almost all the organised events of the temple – Sunday school, singing of *sutras*, staged plays, sports – and even joined in the observance of the Eight Precepts. This is a type of retreat where

one partakes only one meal before midday. The rest of the day is spent reading Buddhist texts, meditating and chanting; the day's activities end only after the evening service.

My mother and other *sarong kebaya*-clad Nonyas volunteered in the kitchen to prepare vegetarian Nonya food like *bubor*, *rojak*, *jagaran*, *popiah* and vegetable curry, and thanks to her culinary creativity, *sambal belimbing* with *tauki* (gluten) instead of prawns. Meals were served to the clergy and volunteers daily and every Sunday!

Mangala Vihara became the premier Peranakan Chinese temple for occasions such as the Lunar New Year, Cheng Beng, wedding solemnisations, death anniversaries, thanksgiving ceremonies, birthdays and other Buddhist events. The community of Babas and Nonyas was enriched in this environment.

Progressively, the temple added a Chapter House (for ordinations and other activities of the clergy) and a

three-storey extension (completed in 1983). The temple attracted other devotees from the Burmese and Sri Lankan communities as well as other Singaporeans but saw a decline in Peranakan Chinese members. My parents and their peers passed away and their children and grandchildren became drawn to other teachings and temples.

Another group started the Tisarana Temple in Duku Road and celebrated its 30th anniversary in March. Other Theravada Buddhists societies and informal groups have sprung up throughout the island including Thai and Burmese temples.

While the presence of the Peranakans is becoming less distinguishable, the spread of the religion can be traced to the benefactress Madam Chew. Every December, the temple remembers her death anniversary with special prayers. ❀

For more information, visit
www.mangalavihara.org.sg

TAI GUAN TONG

A crumbling nunnery in Penang with Peranakan connections

By Christopher Lim and Ee Sin Soo

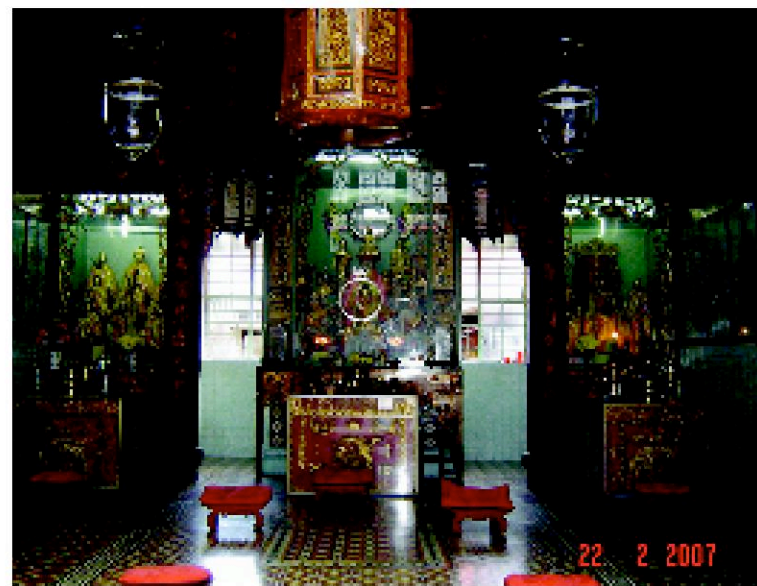
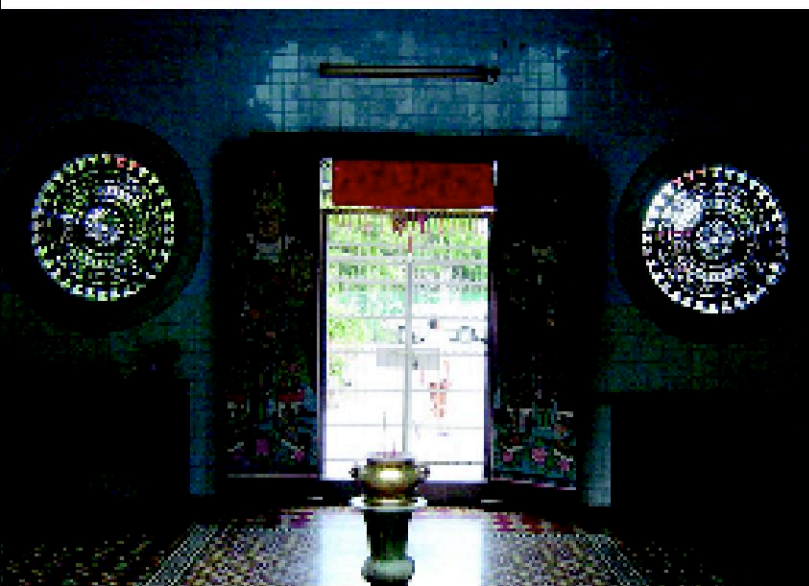
Penang's Tai Guan Tong Nunnery at 212B Jalan Macalister, is similar in many respects to Singapore's Sian Teck Tng Vegetarian Convent at Cuppage Road. The Penang nunnery, which is a part of a larger complex including a monastery, Tai Sing Tong, had a line of Kor Tais (Mother Superiors) who were Penang Peranakans. Sadly there is only one surviving nun. Both places have their own entrances and are of different sizes and arrangements. The nunnery was established in the mid-1870s, practising Buddhist vegetarian precepts and serving the Penang Peranakan community. Old black and white photos survive, of the last Kor Tai of Tai Guan Tong visiting Sian Teck Tng in Singapore,

illustrating the links they have had with each other.

The temple is situated within a walled compound and is approached through a driveway leading to a wide forecourt filled with fruit trees. The temple is built in a classic southern Chinese style with a high single-story, unornamented front, large circular windows, curving roof line and a pair of elongated columns supported by stylised beams. The present structure was completed in about 1903. The nunnery consists of a large prayer hall, a cavernous kitchen, living quarters, utility and storage rooms. The high ceilings and large doorways allow excellent ventilation. Behind the main hall there is even a bomb shelter beneath

Entrance to Tai Guan Tong's main shrine hall.





Views of the main shrine hall, showing the entrance (left) and altars (right).

a garden filled with antique ceramic flowerpot stands.

Stepping into the main shrine hall which is decorated with late Victorian floor tiles, imposing columns carved with gilded inscriptions and elaborate roof beams and brackets, one immediately encounters three elaborately carved altars for the deities of the Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian pantheons: the Shakyamuni Buddha, the *bodhisattva* Guanyin, Nine Emperor Gods, Kuan Kong (who is sort of the patron deity of policemen, soldiers, politicians and businessmen), Hua Tou (deity of healing and medicine) and Confucius. The altars are decorated with delicate Victorian *objets d'art* of flowers in a vase, encased within glass domes (*gelas tutop* or *bunga tutop*). Images of the Eighteen Lohans or *Arhats* adorn both sides of the walls, protecting those within from evil and allowing them to open themselves to meditation and spiritual exploration. Prayers to the Seven Sisters (the Jade Emperor's daughters) are also held on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month for Cantonese devotees. To celebrate the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods, Penang Peranakan style vegetarian food is served here on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month.

Chinese-style Peranakan furniture can be found at almost any corner. Murals illustrating the different levels of hell and suffering decorate some of the other walls as well as glassed cabinets framed by ornate carvings filled with neatly-arranged rows of 'red and gold' ancestor tablets.

Although the century-old masonry appears to be in relatively good condition, there are noticeable water patches, and cracks. The leaking roof has stained the ceiling, damaged the intricate woodcarvings and gilding, which have been already eaten away by insects. Peeling paintwork and broken concrete add a sad air to this fine

historical structure. Tai Guan Tong is a rare gem slowly deteriorating and crumbling from years of neglect and the declining number of nuns and devotees, and is in dire need of funds for urgent restoration.*

A TREASURE TROVE OF VINTAGE COLLECTIBLES

*Peranakan
beaded items,
silver, early
photographs,
out-of-print
books,
advertising signs,
clocks, cameras,
tin toys and
many more
exciting finds*

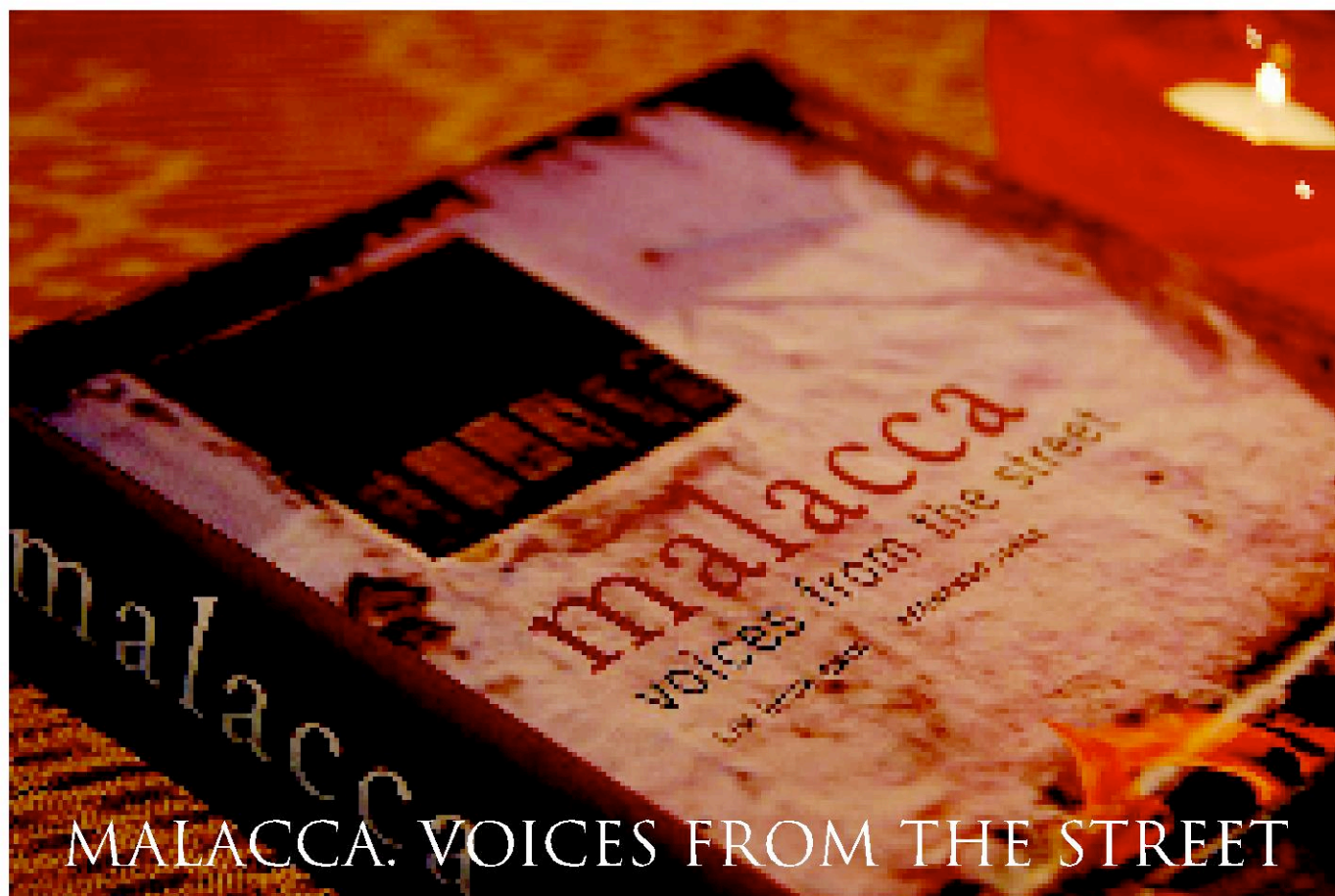


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MALACCA. VOICES FROM THE STREET

Written by Lim Huck Chin and Fernando Jorge

Published by Lim Huck Chin • Printed in Malaysia, 2006

Reviewed by Colin Chee

In case you don't know yet, there is an interesting and extremely well researched book on Malacca, or to be more accurate, Malacca's many historic streets. But from the stories weaved around these, the historic seaside town comes alive.

The book is called *Malacca. Voices from the Street*. You cannot possibly miss this thick 359-page tome if you happen to be at Peter Wee's shop in Katong. It sits there on the table, inviting you to at least turn its pages. The book's cover features one of Malacca's Indian temples. But you would not know this until you see the caption inside.

Written and published by Lim Huck Chin and Fernando Jorge, the book is an obvious labour of love. "We began by listening" say the authors in the book's Foreword. A little bit of poetry perhaps, but enough to bait your eyes to linger longer on what they have to say.

The research traces the past and present history of some thirty Malaccan streets — from the popularly known Jonker Street and Heeren Street, to Fort Road, Blacksmith Street, Bunga Raya Road and Bandar Hilir Road.

The authors have chosen to use the street names that Malaccans of all generations continue to use rather than the official Malaysian names that have been given to many of them. For instance, Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock only appears at the start of the chapter on Heeren Street. Same for Jalan Hang Jebat. Do you know

that is the present name of Jonker Street?

A trained architect who has schooled and worked many years abroad before returning to Malaysia, Lim's trained eye and heart clearly decry the destruction that is being done to historic Malacca by avarice and indiscriminate, unthinking progress. Jorge is also an architect and both authors have a love of heritage and history.

It shows clearly through their story telling. I would have preferred that they quoted the over fifty people they interviewed to tell their story. That would have added a real-life nuance to their story telling. But this is another matter. What we have still is a straightforward narrative, with the occasional quote, that compels you to read on in chunks as the streets are revealed one at a time.

The book is best read this way. One street at a time, mulled over, tasted, turned every which way, before starting on the next.

Of Heeren Street the authors write, with a tell-tale sadness: "Today, Heeren Street's handful of remaining families still consciously burn offerings...many sold for commercial use, many left to rot. Today, fewer than forty of the road's one hundred and eighty three houses continue to serve as homes."

And of Jonker Street, they quote a resident: "So much of our history has already been lost. So much is still being lost." ❀

SHORT AND SWEET

The Peranakan Association's 107th Annual General Meeting.

By Chan Eng Thai

It is said that the Peranakan person is one who would not hesitate to voice his or her opinion in the matters relating to the Peranakan Community or in matters affecting the Community's activities, the 107th Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Peranakan Association however was very much otherwise.

The AGM was held on Saturday 24 March 2007 at 2.30pm, in the Napier Room of the RELC Building and out of the 1,815 registered members of the Association, 33 members took the time and effort to be present.

The meeting could only commence at 3.00pm as there was no quorum and when it was convened, the President Mr. Lee Kip Lee delivered his annual speech.

Mr. Lee gave a rundown of the activities which the Association had for the year 2006 as well as for the months of January and February of 2007. The Peranakan Voices' participation at the events in and around Singapore, the Istana tea party attended by our members which was at the invitation of the President of Singapore, the launching of the long awaited Baba Dictionary sponsored by the Association and the play *Being & Becoming* staged by the Youth Group were the major activities highlighted by him.

The AGM then proceeded with the adoption of the minutes



of the last AGM, the President's Annual Report and the re-appointment of the Honorary Auditor for another year. As there were no elections (which are held once in two years) and questions from members, the AGM ended within a span of 15 minutes! After that everyone adjourned to the foyer for tea, coffee, bee hoon, popiah and samosas, which lasted 30 minutes!

I would request members of The Peranakan Association to take an active part in the Association's

matters, try your best to attend the next AGM. It is an occasion when the Association's President and the Committee members can meet members and hear their views and ideas on how to make the Peranakan Community a vibrant and enduring part of Singapore.

*Popiah bee hoon sama kopi pekat,
Paneh paneh siang siang sudah siap,
Ahli Peranakan kita chiah sampay penat,
Datang tiga puluh tiga, seribu bochap!
The spring rolls, vermicelli and brewed coffee,
Piping hot, are prepared early,
Members of the PA we invite and invite,
Thirty three came and the thousand did not! ❀*

PERANAKAN VOICES AT ISTANA STAFF GATHERING

By Angeline Kong

Earlier this month, our very own singing group, The Peranakan Voices, was invited to perform at the Istana's Annual Staff Dinner 2007. Held on 9 March at the NUS Guild House, the event was graced by the presence of The President and Mrs S R Nathan, and attended by Istana staff and their spouses.

Compered by Clement Chow, the dinner also featured performances by the Eurasian Association and local group The Serenaders, and an energetic Indian dance item by 13-year-old Miss Aruna d/o Anantha Sayanam.

As we had been lined up as the last performance for the



evening, we could not wait to go on stage and could feel the excitement in the air move one notch higher when it came to our turn. Colourful costumes, heartfelt singing plus Peranakan and familiar songs seemed to enthrall the audience. The overwhelming applause was so encouraging. In fact, some of them liked it so much they came up to sing and dance with us in our encore rendition of "Bengawan Solo"!

It was a privilege and pleasure for the Peranakan Voices to have performed for the Istana. We are happy we played a part in making the event a memorable one for their staff and also for ourselves. ❀



THE
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