



APRIL-JUNE 2008  
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# *the peranakan*



CELEBRATING MALAY AND INDIAN CULTURAL INFLUENCES  
**PLUS THE NEW PERANAKAN MUSEUM!!**



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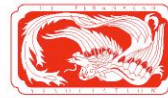
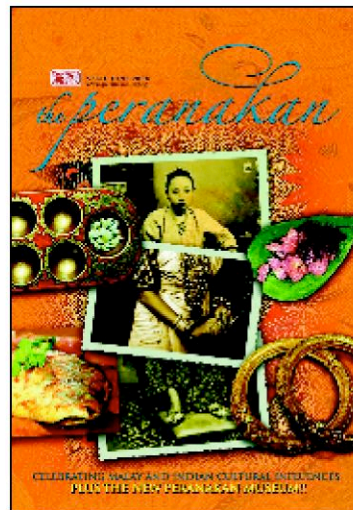
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# THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM: SHOWCASING A LIVING CULTURE

A new landmark has opened in Armenian Street with a collection of the world's most comprehensive and finest Peranakan artefacts. **Linda Chee** finds out more in an interview with **Baba Randall Ee**, curator of The Peranakan Museum.



*The wedding bed or ranjang kawen in full splendour.*

**G**uided by the dictum that culture is for everyone, the new Peranakan Museum features objects used not just by wealthy Peranakans but also artefacts and stories from the daily life of this unique community.

The museum opens its doors to the public on 26 April this year. It is special in being the only museum that is devoted solely to the Peranakan culture. Just as fascinating, it also uses our Baba Malay patois as one of three languages, besides English and Mandarin, for the main introductory text to each gallery.

Baba Randall Ee, curator of the Peranakan Museum, says that the choice was logical to create such a landmark from the former premises of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM). This is because from early on our Peranakan culture appealed to both locals and tourists.

"When the ACM first opened here in 1997, we had only one Peranakan showcase. In 2000, it grew to four galleries." The awareness of the culture, he recalls, was growing very rapidly then and it helped a great deal that the Singapore Tourism Board and The Peranakan Association were actively promoting the culture.



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### JUNK TO JEWELS: The things that Peranakans value (26 April - August 2008)

The inaugural special exhibition, curated by our own Baba Peter Lee, features heirlooms – past and present – treasured by Peranakan families. Encounter intimate stories and emotions attached to everyday objects and finely crafted works of art on loan from over 20 families. Exhibits include recipe books, wedding shoes from the 1900s and even Baba Dick Lee's Cultural Medallion.

### The Peranakan Museum: Interesting trivia

- features 10 galleries and over 1,200 artefacts sourced from as far as the Netherlands.
- is housed in a building that is a national monument, and is the original home of Tao Nan School.
- Prominent Baba Oei Tiong Ham gave S\$10,000 in 1908 for the construction of the building in which the Peranakan Museum is now housed.



The term 'Peranakan' meaning 'child of' or 'born of' in Malay has come to refer to the descendants of traders who intermarried with local women in Southeast Asia. Over time, a distinctive culture that brought together Chinese, Malay, Indian, European and other influences, emerged.

This guide to the Peranakan Museum in Singapore features over a hundred fully illustrated entries written by the museum's curators, independent academics and researchers. It provides the reader with glimpses into the lifestyle of the Peranakan Chinese community, in all its facets and expressions. Those include everyday household objects, distinctive crafts such as beadwork and embroidery, colourful porcelain, textiles, jewellery and the fine gilded furniture that graced the homes of the wealthier Peranakans. Intriguing aspects of the culture such as language and poetic forms are explored as well.



The Peranakan Museum A-Z Guide is an indispensable companion for cultural enthusiasts seeking an accessible introduction to one of Southeast Asia's most colorful living cultures.



peranakan MUSEUM A-Z GUIDE

### PERANAKAN MUSEUM

# A-Z

GUIDE



### COMMEMORATIVE STAMPS

To mark the milestone, Singapore Post has created a series of stamps called the "Peranakan Museum Collection", now out at all post offices. You can also purchase online at <http://shop.vpost.com.sg>



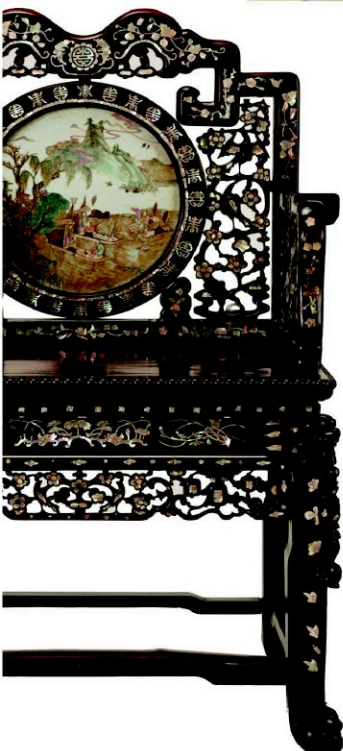
### A-Z BOOK

The Museum has published an A – Z book with over 200 pages featuring its collection of artefacts as well as entries on Baba Malay, Penang Baba Hokkien and other non-artefact based terms in patois.





*This 126x118cm tablecloth, sewn with over a million manek potong (beads), is one of the largest known pieces of Peranakan beadwork.*



The museum's aim is always to preserve the past whilst presenting the culture as still thriving and evolving. From the very beginning therefore, the Museum collaborated closely with the community to build its collection of artefacts and the human and family stories that give them life and colour. The museum also explored and continues to probe the links between different Peranakan communities in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and even Australia.

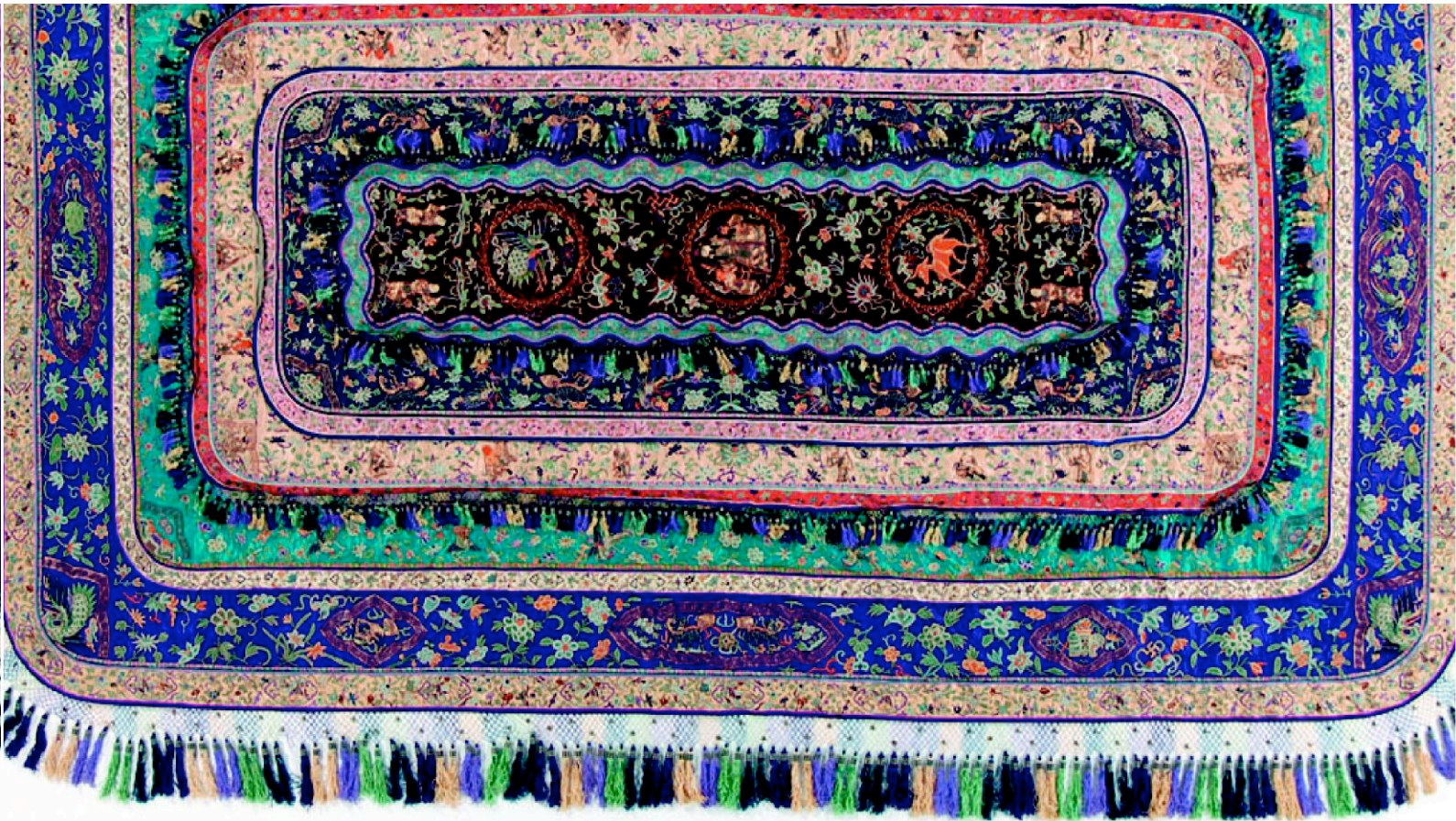
Its ten galleries showcase not only old objects but also try to bring to life, through interactive elements, what is happening in the community today, especially in its programmes. For example, Gallery 10 explores the

views of Peranakans from different walks of life about their heritage and the future of their culture. A couple of interviews are conducted purely in Baba Malay with Lawrence Ow, the cultural doyen of Malacca, on the importance of *sireh* and the 12-day confirmation of the bride.

The educational segments are geared towards the living aspects of the culture. Besides the supremely important area of Peranakan food, the exhibits also explore new trends in dressing and other expressions of the younger generation - such as their plays, how they reinterpret old traditions and norms, their design inspirations for beadworks and other creative pursuits.

Randall, himself a Baba, with family origins in Singapore and Malacca, believes that the museum has an important role to play in showcasing what many people regard as a dying language - Baba Malay. Therefore, besides using our patois as the third language, the museum has launched a book on the A-Z of artefacts, words, terms and any other Peranakan usage that you can think of within the 26-alphabet range.





*This heavily embroidered coffin cover measures almost four metres long.*

The culture, he believes, has really come of age. Randall, who is in his 30s, observes that interest in the living culture of the Peranakans has been tremendous and continues to grow. "We are not a dying breed. Yes, the world that the older generation knows, seems to be fading. But there is the younger generation that's Peranakan in a different contemporary environment. Just look at Singapore. Things are changing and it is not just the Peranakans. We are evolving

our culture but I think without realising it we are still somewhat rooted to fundamental aspects of our past and traditions.

"Our culture is evolving rapidly. The museum can help to tell the story of the Peranakans – our past, the beautiful objects that identify us as a unique community and what the younger generation is doing to build on that," Randall declares. ❷



*A very rare indigo blue chupu.*



*A magnificent pair of multi-tiered pagoda trays used for special occasions like the lap chye (presentation of gifts) in a traditional Peranakan wedding.*



# THE INDIAN CONNECTION

Observations by **Baba Christopher Lim** on the rich influences of India and Sri Lanka on the Peranakan culture.

*Enchanting bells I hear from afar,  
What can it be but my lovely Sitar,  
Thoughts of being in a land so far,  
But my Nyonya calling me Baba.*

*Heartfelt greetings it calls to me,  
Smells so wonderful I smile with glee,  
Servings of rice with dishes of three,  
Kari Kapitan cooked by my lovely  
Gayathree.*

*Robed in sarong kebaya as in royalty,  
Bracelets of gold and anklets worn  
enchantingly,  
Oh Nyonya, my darling it's you my  
lovely,*

*A reflection of our Peranakan dignity!*

by Christopher Lim

Indian Hindu and Buddhist cultural influences have had tremendous effect on the Southeast Asian region as early as the ninth century owing to Indian merchants' long connection with this region.

There has been a blending of their religiosity, culture and food with that of the Peranakans, impacting our culture through interaction with their clergy, jewellers, tradesmen, inter-marriage/adoption and even the employment of domestic staff in Peranakan households.

Other influences are believed to have come from the Punjabis (also known as *Bangkali*) and the Nepali Gurkhas.

Here are some examples that I have observed.

## Gelang Kaki (Anklets)

As a sign of their virginity and marriageable age, Indian girls go through an elaborate ceremony for their coming of age. One of the items presented to them are anklets. Similarly, nyonyas adorned themselves with the *gelang kaki* when they came of age and continued to wear them till the early years of marriage. Although it may have been originally Indian in its inspiration, use and meaning, the *gelang kaki* was modified by nyonyas to include Chinese motifs.

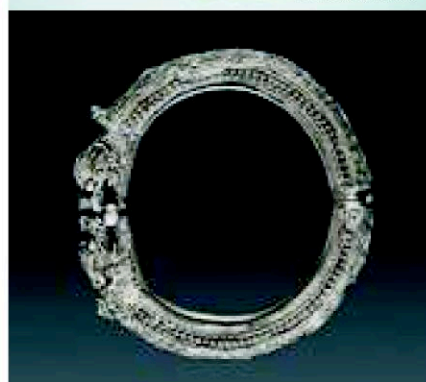
I remember vividly my grandmother's many funny stories when she wore the *gelang kaki* during her teenage years.



Terompak



Gelang Kaki



There were no robberies even though she secretly dangled her legs out of the window just for fun.

## Terompak (Clogs)

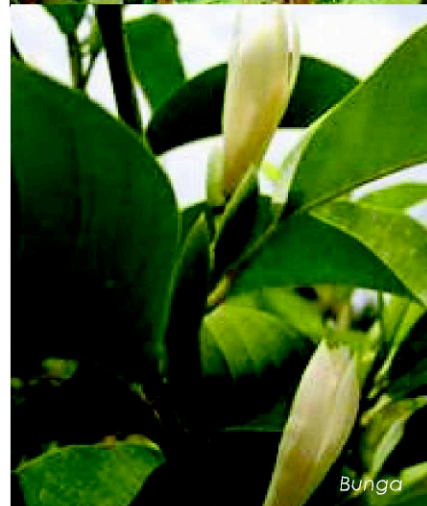
Originally known as *Paduka* in the Indian language. The wearer would have to use her first two toes to grip the knob tightly in order to move around. The photo shows an antique silver pair. The regular ones are made out of wood. My great-grandmother wore such footwear at home as it was practical both in a wet or dry kitchen.

## Sinhalese Jewellers

Nyonyas used to commission Sinhalese jewellers to design and set their jewellery for them. Ranging from



Jewellery



Bunga

bracelets and earrings to chokers, these skilled crafts-men produced many fine pieces that incorporated Chinese, Malay, Indian and European influences. Today, not many Sinhalese jewellers are left as most of these master craftsmen have passed on and the younger generation has been reluctant to pick up this trade.

## Bunga (Flowers)

The use of fragrant flowers in the hair as ladies' adornment and temple offerings have an Indian appeal. These flowers connect the nyonyas to nature and the spiritual world, heralding the blessing of the deities. From the





The man's sarong (*kain pelikat*) is also worn at home by the Babas and Malay men.

floral tiara which adorns the nyonya's *sanggol* to the customary washing with seven kinds of flowers, our Peranakan tradition of using flowers may have been inherited and inspired by the Indians.

### Sarong

The sarong even attracted British officials during the colonial days. Wearing the *kain pelikat* was a way to stay cool. Coming originally from the Bay of Pulicat on the Coromandel Coast, Tamil Nadu men wear the *lungyi* (Tamil term for chequered sarong). It is the only state in South India where the men wear the *kain pelikat* in the manner we do (i.e. sewn from top to bottom to form a tubular piece of clothing). Those from the other states wear it wrapped around like a *dothi* (gold border flat white / cream piece of cloth).

In the early days, some older bibiks wore the *kain pelikat* for their daily house wear instead of the *kain sarong*.

I have been wearing my *kain pelikat* since my secondary school years and am still wearing it in Western Australia.

### Baba

The term "Baba" has been and is still being used in North India. According to the Sikh encyclopedia, Baba, a Persian word meaning 'father' or 'grandfather', is used as a title of affection and reverence. In its original Persian context, Baba is a title used for superiors of the Qalandar order of the Sufis, but translated into the Indian context its meaning extends to cover the elderly as well.



### Curries

Peranakan families use Indian spices and curry leaves to enhance and re-create some of their dishes like *kari kapitan*, *kong bak* and *kuah lada*. While *kari kapitan* has its Indian Muslim versions, the same dish has its Peranakan version with fried shallots as a garnish. Other times, opting for a change in the daily menu, nyonyas have also cooked *kelinga gulai* (Indian curries), *korma* and *kiam hoo koot gulai* (Peranakan salted fish bone curry) in clay pots.

### The Tiffin Carrier (*Tengkat* or *Uanh Chan*)

*Tengkat* or *Uanh Chan*, which in Penang Baba Hokkien means stacked bowls, is the term for a food carrier from the subcontinent. "Tiffin" is an old term of the Raj meaning "lunch". A tiffin carrier or *dabba* is an Indian lunch box that resembles a metal cylinder.

Indian tiffin carriers are simple in natural aluminum and are rarely coloured. The Peranakans transformed them into enamelled statements with colourful designs in old Malay like, "*Slamat Bukha*, *Slamat Makan* and *Slamat Minome*" gracing each tier.

Colourful tiffin carriers.



### Chatty (Claypots)

One can always find Indian curry claypots (above) to cook curries. Somehow, the element of the clay from the pot adds more aroma and flavour to the Indian curry.

According to my grandaunt, before using a brand new claypot for cooking, one has to fry freshly grated coconut to season the claypot.

### Boria

*Boria* performances in Penang are known to originate from Persia and brought to Penang by the Indians of Shiah origin. *Boria* in Penang is divided into two sections. The processional day performances are called the *kuli kalin* and are traditionally performed during the first five days of Muharram (Muslim New Year) between noon and four in the afternoon. The night performances are known as *boria*. Original performers





Hindu deities.

of Boria wear masks or paint their faces in various designs. The costumes are modelled on original sackcloth garments, often funny in shape. Boria as a performing art promised all round musical entertainment for both the public and the entertainers. For the Babas and Nyonyas, it provided the opportunity for them to enjoy themselves.

#### Religion and belief systems

Peranakans have an open attitude towards all religions. Some are devotees of Ganesh and are known to donate generously to temples dedicated to this deity, even making several pilgrimages to India.

Another favourite deity is Ganesh's sibling deity, Subramaniam / Murugan / Karthikesan, during Thaipusam. My friend's mother (Nyonya Tan) in her nineties is a devout believer and will never fail to offer incense, coconut, flowers and a comb of bananas on her gold platter when the silver chariot of the deity passes her home.



The Mahindarama Sri Lankan Buddhist temple in Penang.

#### Sathya Sai Baba

Some Peranakan families have Sai Baba's portrait beside the images of Kuan Imm Hood Chor (Goddess of Mercy) on their family altar.

#### Buddha and Mahindarama Temple

The Mahindarama temple in Penang is a Sri Lankan Buddhist temple with a strong following of Peranakan Buddhists and benefactors.

#### Sikh guard statues in Khoo Kongsi

Carved from the same stone which adorn the other parts of the Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsi building in Canon Square, Penang, are two statues of Sikh guards. Portrayed fully uniformed and holding rifles, these well-chiselled "turbanned sentinels" stand at attention at the entrance of the clan house to welcome guests.

#### Education

Some Penang Peranakan families sent their children (especially their sons) to be educated in the colleges of British Calcutta.

#### Indian influences in my family

I remember my paternal grandmother cooking egg *far-lee-foo*, a corruption of *parepoo curry/ sambar* or Indian lentil mixed vegetable curry which was eaten with fresh sprigs of mint and a pinch of *sambal belachan*. She cooked it during family parties to celebrate different occasions.

In our family we also use certain Tamil words like *karu pillai* for curry leaves, *koleh* for big plastic mugs, *katek* for someone who's short, *tali* for string, *dhobi* for laundry, *roti* for bread, *cuti* for holiday, *toddy* for the alcoholic palm drink and *kutu* for lice.

My maternal grandmother had a saying *Kelinga snooi poh tho* (Indians counting their grapes) to mean that one is not satisfied counting his money once.

I also remember my grandmother and grandaunt speaking Hindi or Urdu to each other when it came to discussing prices in a shop. 𑂔



A print of Calcutta's Medical College, founded in 1835.

Rich families of Penang had loyal security guards who were Sikhs or from other Indian groups.





# SEKAPOR SIREH

*Of all things Peranakan, nothing captivates me more than a nyonya's Tempat Sireh (betelnut set).*

By Norman Cho

In the old days, a *sireh* set was a prized possession in the Peranakan household. It was a customary article that was utilitarian yet a status symbol. It was the pride and joy of the nyonya matriarch! No expense was spared.

## The Sireh Set

The Malayan Peranakan set consists typically of a pair of shears (*kachep*), two globular covered containers, one lidless bowl-shaped container and one cylindrical container with a spatula. All these were placed in a special lidless rectangular box with an L-shaped partition and drawer. The wealthy had the boxes fashioned out of exotic materials like turtle-shell, mother-of-pearl, red-and-gold namwood, gilded teakwood, blackwood with mother-of-pearl inlay, silver (sometimes with enamel) and in very rare instances, gold. The silver or gold boxes and containers would be decorated in various metalwork techniques such as repoussé, chasing, and occasionally appliqué or filigree.

However, the set would commonly come in a floral Palembang-made lacquer box. The box was probably acquired separately by the silversmiths who placed orders on behalf of the clients. They might even have been acquired by the nyonyas from specialty stores dealing in woodcraft like cane and lacquerware. The containers were usually made of silver but could be fashioned in gold. The Indonesian Peranakan set usually came as a hexagonal box or a rectangular-pyramidal lidded box. It may have been accompanied by a silver betel-leaf holder. The range of styles is simply mind-boggling!

Each container would hold slivers of areca nut (commonly known as betel nut), gambier and tobacco while the cylindrical container would contain the lime paste. The spatula was used to spread the lime over the betel leaf. The

shears for slicing the areca nut were stored in the drawer while the leaves were slotted into the small rectangular. The set would be accompanied by a table spittoon (usually porcelain or silver) and a mini granite mortar-and-pestle set.

The betel leaves were washed and the areca nut and gambier sliced. Next, some lime paste was spread on the leaf and topped with the areca slices and the gambier and tobacco. It was then wrapped into bite-size pieces. An indispensable item was the large handkerchief draped over the *baju panjang*, used to wipe the messy red stains from the mouth. Interestingly, it was modernisation that led to the demise of the *sireh*-chewing habit. As nyonyas discarded the *baju panjang* for the *baju kebaya*, so too did they discard the practice of chewing *sireh*. It was viewed with disdain as unhygienic and barbaric.

## Cultural Significance

The nyonyas most likely adopted the custom of chewing *sireh* from the Malays. This set them apart from the migrant Chinese. Incidentally, only the nyonyas took to the habit of chewing the *sireh* and not the *babas*.

The early nyonyas held the *sireh* sets in high regard just like the Malay, Indonesian, Thai and Cambodian royal courts. The royal families often had their portraits painted or photographs taken with attendants bearing the *sireh* set, as it formed part of the royal regalia.

Nyonyas considered *sireh* chewing as a social recreation. The hosts would often bring out their *sireh* set to invite guests to chew the *sireh* together as they caught up with the latest gossip, just as we entertain guests with tea or coffee to show warmth and hospitality. However, some fastidious nyonyas who were particular about the quality of condiments took their own silver *sireh* sets when visiting.

The *sireh* played a pivotal role in the traditional wedding ceremony. When the wedding invitation was dispatched,



Up to the early 20th century, portraits of nyonyas often included a *sireh* set prominently displayed on the table next to them, in a manner similar to that of royal portraits.







Paraphernalia for chewing sireh: Betelnut set consisting of a box; a cutter to slice the areca nut (pinang) from which the island of Penang got its name; two lidded round containers and an open one for tobacco, areca nuts and gambier; one cylindrical container with a spatula for the lime paste; a porcelain spittoon; a batik hankchief; and a mortar and pestle set to break the areca nut for old toothless bibiks.

sireh would be personally delivered to each household to accompany the invitation card. No to do so would signify a lack of sincerity. During the wedding, the *sireh* set would be included as part of the bridal trousseau, accompanying the bride during the bridal procession.

It had an important role in proclaiming the virginity of the bride. The *sireh* set would remain in the bridal chamber for the duration of the 12-day ceremony. If the bridegroom had any reason to suspect that the bride had not been a virgin before the marriage, he was given the privilege of annulling the marriage by overturning the *sireh* set. Similarly, on the twelfth day of the wedding, if the mother-in-law was not convinced about the bride's virginity upon inspecting the *kain cheo thau* (virginity cloth), she could also overturn the *sireh* set to annul the marriage. However, such an incident was never heard of. It was likely that the bridegrooms in those days were too timid to protest and the mother-in-law did not want to "lose face" by proclaiming that her hand-picked daughter-in-law was not a virgin.

#### Medicinal applications

The *sireh* leaf is used in traditional remedies too. My grandmother used it to treat fever (*berawa*) to bring down the temperature when I was young.

The ingredients are as follows:

- 2 cloves peeled shallots
- 1 betel leaf
- 1 handful *daun aroda* (rue leaves)
- A few dashes of Eau-de-Cologne

Pound the ingredients into a paste. Rub onto the forehead, behind the ears, on the neck and under the armpits. It feels refreshing and cool. Repeat a few times throughout the day to expel the heat. Personally, I think it is very scientific as the shallots induce perspiration while the cologne is volatile and helps to vaporize the perspiration and thus expel heat from the body. The pungent rue leaves may be aromatically therapeutic while enhancing the volatile property of the paste as it contains ketones, a form of secondary alcohol. The betel leaf contains phenol which has antiseptic properties.

#### Sekapor sireh

The phrase "*sekapor sireh sair*" (just a spread of the *sireh*) means just a quick glimpse, reminiscence or introduction. This article is also *sekapor sireh sair* on the importance of *sireh* to a traditional *nyonya*. Sadly, the custom has become obsolete. Still, a *tempat sireh* will always be coveted by many an avid collector, just as it was treasured by the *nyonyas* of yore. ❧





# CHONGKAK CHALLENGE

*Dr Partha Desikan, based in Bangalore, India, explores the game of Chongkak and its origins.*

In an account of a visit to Pulau Ubin in 2001, a student of Raffles' Girls School wrote,

"I happened to find a funny board that looked like an egg tray in my aunt's room, after lunch. My aunt told me that it was a *Chongkak* board. She said that *Chongkak* is played between two persons only and the boards come in many shapes such as that of dragons' heads and fishes. While the board usually has one row of seven holes, along each side, and one hole at either end, this may vary. The two rows of holes are called *kampongs* or villages and the larger holes at both ends of the board are called *rumah* or home. At the start of the game, each of the holes in the *kampongs* has 6, 7, 8 or 9 seeds placed in it.

## Playing the game is simple

1. Take all the seeds in any one of the holes and distribute the seeds one at each hole, continuously.
2. The game continues until one player collects all the seeds in his *rumah*.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to play the game that day as I couldn't find anyone to play with me. My cousins were out running errands for my aunt and my aunt was busy."

That is probably one of the neatest and shortest descriptions of how *Chongkak* has to be played! Another study in a US school for a project described it as a board game called *Mancala*. Apparently, *Mancala* has hundreds of different variations, for example, *Ti*, *Kpo*, *Wari*, *Azigo*, *Igisoro* and *Omweso*, which show the diversity of Africa. The type of board also varies. Rich men of leisure may play on carved ivory boards covered with gold; others just using a few holes in the ground with pebbles as playing pieces. The game must have first evolved, thousands of years back in Africa, with holes in the mud made on demand or rock cut holes for relative permanency and weatherproofing!

Here are the student's words: "The word, *Mancala* means 'to transfer' in Arabic. You transfer, or move, playing pieces from one bin to another. Our class made the *Mancala* board from egg cartons."

The popular online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, describes five exotic variations:

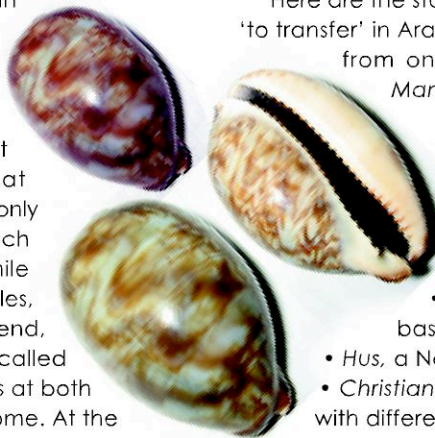
- *Eson xorgol*, a game played by the Kazakh minority in western Mongolia, traditionally using goat faeces! (The board is 2x5),
- *Das Bohnenspiel*, a German *Mancala*, based on a Persian game (2x6),
- *Hus*, a Namibian game (4x8),
- *Christian Freeling's* complex *Mancala*-style game with different coloured stones, called the Glass Bead Game, and
- *55 Stones*, a modern *Mancala* game with simultaneous moves.

It also gives a formidable list of over 70 other games, starting from *Chongkak*, which is played in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines with a 2x7 board.

## Variations on a name

In my homeland, South India, at least five versions of the game are played, all using a 2x6 board, with the mandatory two extra houses. In my mother-tongue Tamil, it is known as *Pallaanguzhi*. In Kannada, the language of Bangalore and the state of Karnataka, it is known as *Hal(lu)gunimane* and *Channamane* (nice house). In the rich old Tulu language of coastal Karnataka, which does not yet have a script of its own, the name used is *Arasaata*, or The King's Game. In Telugu, the language of Andhra Pradesh, the names are *Vaamana guntalu* or the hollows of the dwarf and *Vanagallapeetha*. In Malayalam, the language of Kerala, the board is referred to as *Parakkuzhi*, meaning something spread in pits or hollows (*kuzhis*).

The pieces transferred from hollow to hollow are called *hallus* and *pals*, namely teeth, in South India. The actual pieces







Mancala board with 48 playing pieces using glass beads.

used were cowry shells for a long time, later replaced by tough seeds (tamarind seeds in Tamil and olinda seeds in Sri Lanka) or by smooth pebbles.

The Bahasa Indonesian name for the game, *Congklak* and the closely-related Malaysian and Singaporean name *Chongkak* are both believed to refer to cowry shells, though the word *Tengkuyung* could describe these shells better. What matters is that the ancient use of cowry shells as play-pieces has been blessed also in the game nomenclature. Pearls are called *muthus* in Tamil, and in view of their pleasant white glow, pearls have been used by ancient Tamil poets to compare with teeth. The prominent South Indian names for *Chongkak* variations incorporate a reference to the cowry shell while the Malaysian/Singaporean name for the game itself stands for the cowry shell.

Commercial travellers from the Middle East, before and after the advent of Islam, must have been picking up various versions of the game from African lands and taking them home and elsewhere, for instance to India and beyond on their spice trade jaunts and to China and beyond on their silk trade travels. Game lore must have travelled in reverse directions as well, polishing, modifying and multiplying. The ubiquitous cowry shells, which even enjoyed currency status in the Chinese mainland in the past, must have been collected in great quantities around the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Straits and carried around, first for their

monetary value and later out of pure fancy and force of habit.

Have you visited *Sungai Chongkak*, the lovely nature park in Selangor, which is the haunt of young bachelors and young maidens alike? Try playing *Chongkak*, the experience could be equally satisfying. ♣

*This is an excerpt of an article that can be found on our website [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg)*

## THE COLLECTION OF KATONG ANTIQUE HOUSE

Nyonya lady dressed in baju panjang and pekalongan batik sarong



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# PERFUMED AND PUNGENT

The world of Baba Malay nicknames.

By Peter Lee



From the haze of a poorly remembered childhood, faint impressions of half-heard conversations still linger in my mind.

When I think of the Baba Malay language that I heard then, I only recall a sense of the ceaseless chatter of my aunts and grandaunts. It was always a kind of background hum, like a Balinese gamelan with its polyrhythmic cadences and narrow range of tones, rising to crescendos of laughter, excitement, anger or disapproval, descending into conspiratorial murmurs when the conversation moved to topics unsuitable for the ears of young ones.

Somehow the nicknames mentioned in these conversations stand out like beacons in this haze. They were usually names derived from Malay words. Ironic, complimentary, practical, poetic, they seem to embody the soul of the Peranakans, hinting with a simple word or two, at untold histories, forgotten joys and tragedies, hope and despair.

There were two broad categories of names: those that were used to address people in their presence, and those that were used to describe them in their absence. As you can imagine, in the first category, the names were sometimes complimentary, or in most cases, innocuous. In the second category, the names show Peranakan humour and wit at their best, or perhaps it would be more truthful to say, their worst.

Fundamental to the nickname is the prefix, which when attached to a common word, denotes a person's name. The most generic prefix is *Si*, 'the one'. Therefore *Si Geylang* would be a nickname that means 'The One from Geylang'. The other prefixes may be family rank titles, such as *Mak* (grandmother), *Tachi* (elder sister), *Ng ku* (maternal uncle), etc. Therefore *Mak Geylang* would refer to a grandmother

who lived in Geylang. Finally there were the general honorific titles, such as *Baba* (or *Ba*), *Nyonya* (or *Nya*), *Bibik* (or *Bik*), and *Wak*. In this case, *Bik Geylang* would refer to a bibik who lived in Geylang.

In the first category there were nicknames derived from the pecking order of the person within the family structure, such as *Besar* (eldest), *Tengah* (middle), *Chik* (youngest) and *Bongsu* (youngest child).

Another variant of the first category is based on the city or district of the person's origin or residence, or in some cases, a characteristic part of a residence. We therefore have nicknames like *Mak Katong* (the Katong Grandmother), *Mak Melaka* (the Malacca Grandmother), *Tachi Klang* (the Klang sister), *Ee Bukom* (the aunt from Bukom), and *Si Pintu Ijo* (the one from [the house with] the green door).

In very rare instances, girls were given rather genteel nicknames. The fact there were so few names with complimentary and positive connotations is something that deserves greater attention and analysis. The few that I have been able to compile are: *Manis* (sweet), *Bintang* (star), *Molek* (dainty), *Jambol* (crest of a bird), *Non* (nonya), *Puteh* (white), *Jepun* (Japanese). As to names with a floral inspiration, I have not been able to hear of one, even after several enquiries. The only example I could find is *Bunga* (flower), which is unfortunately a nickname for a young maid who was covered in pockmarks.

Which leads us to the second category. This kind of irony, sarcasm and humour of the Babas and Nyonyas is most evident in nicknames reserved for referring to a person in their absence.

Perhaps the need for some kind of humorous or characteristic name arose because of the rather unfortunate



## ■ TRADITIONS ■

fact that many official Peranakan names sound the same: Bee Neo, Swee Neo, Ai Neo, Guat Neo, Guat Kim, Beng Lim, Sek Lim, Chee Hoon, Soon Hock, etc etc. In the midst of relating a particularly scandalous tale, it would be too ineffective and imprecise to merely mention the proper name of the protagonists ('Bee Neo? Which Bee Neo?'), while the nickname, say *Si-Potek* (the squint eyed one), is graphic, unambiguous, direct ('Oh yes, the squint eyed one!').

The most obvious nickname described a physical trait, usually a deformity or something out of the ordinary. So therefore we have nicknames employing the following words: *Panjang* (tall) *Pendek* (short), *Kurus* (thin), *Gemok* (fat), *Muka Biru* (blue face or birthmark), *Sombeng* (hairlip), *Gondol* (bald), *Burok* (ugly), *Chabang* (branch, referring to someone with an extra finger), *Itam* (black) and *Gemok Gelemping* (chubby) among others.

Some nicknames were antonymic, so therefore a pretty girl could be called *Si Burok* (the ugly one), while *Si Gemok* (the fat one) could be a very thin lad.

Others described the way of dressing: *Si Sanggol Dua* (the one with a double chignon), *Si Robia* (the one who wears voile), *Bik Gelang Besair* (the bibik with the big bracelets).

Personality traits: *Si Kuping Terlebeh* (the one with extra ears) would be a nickname for a busybody, while *Si Kedukut* (the stingy one) described someone notoriously unwilling to part with any money.

There were also nicknames that were inspired by mannerisms. *Kangkang* (legs spread apart), *Tempang* (limp),

*Pengek* (to tip toe) were words used to refer to people who walked in a peculiar manner. There was an aunt who constantly flapped her arms because she always wore an over-starched kebaya that crinkled around her armpits. She was called *Si Anak Itek* (the duckling).

There were also nicknames that were more metaphorical and abstract, and often related to local flora and fauna, such as *Si Upeh Kering* (crinkled upeh palm leaf) and *Si Chichak Kering* (dried gecko), which described those who were emaciated or deeply wrinkled. A bibik known as *Si Lembu* (the cow) was compared not to the animal's girth but rather its pendulous udders. Someone known as *Si Pantat Monyet* (the one with the monkey's rear) was judged to have a waddling, ample derriere. Several elderly bibiks were named not after fragrant flowers, but rather, vegetables such as *Kuchai* (scallions), *Kangkong* (water convolvulus) and *Kelapa* (coconut), and even cooked dishes such as *Terong Asam* (eggplant in tamarind).

*Si Kamcheek* (the one with worms) was the name of an aunt with a particularly bloated abdomen. *Si Kau Merah* was a woman with a beak shaped nose that looked like the symbol in the *cherki* card, the *kau merah*.

Today however, the name on everyone's lips is a certain *Si Tempang* (the one who limps), who seems to have escaped a high security prison. Everyone has been urged to put on a *kuping terlebeh* or two to find him. ♣

With thanks to William Gwee Thian Hock, G T Lye, Alice Choo and Arthur Lim for their contributions to this article.

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# IN TUNE WITH THE PANTON BABA

*Tan Kuning* examines the form and content of a panton (poem) as sung by the Babas.



Illustration by GE Kiat courtesy of May Oon.

The *panton* Baba, with its roots in Malay poetry, is meant to be sung to the classic tune of *dondang sayang* and other tunes made popular by *Bangsawan* performances since the early twentieth century. The *Bangsawan* evergreens are *Lenggang Lenggang Kangkong*, *Rasa Sayang Eh* and *Nona Nona Jaman Sekarang*, to name a few.

In the *Panton Melayu*, a collection of poems published by R.J. Wilkinson and R.O. Winstedt, it is stated that a *panton* must have four lines in a verse. Each line consists of four or five words and there must be a split of ideas in the middle of each line. The number of syllables in a line must be eight to ten and rhyme in ab,ab format below. Any *panton* that deviates from this form is awkward to sing.

Form	Rhythm	Word count	Syllables
Dua tiga / kucing berlari, 1 23 45 6 78	a	four	= eight
Mana sama/si kucing belang. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9	b	five	= nine
Dua tiga / dapat di chari, 1 23 45 6 78	a	four	= eight
Mana sama/ tuan seorang 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	b	four	= eight

This *panton* conforms well to the standard form. Its rhyme is ab,ab, each line has eight or nine syllables and there is a split in the middle of each line.

## Contents

A good *panton* has contents that are witty, subtle, shows knowledge of nature and the universe, and touches upon some moral or philosophy in life.

## Pembayang Maksud

The first two lines of a *panton* are called the *pembayang maksud*, literally "the shadow of the theme". There is a strong but subtle connection between the *pembayang maksud* and the theme, which is revealed in the third and fourth lines. The *pembayang maksud* thus introduces the theme of the *panton* by subtly creating the context or the mood. One has to look for the implication in the *pembayang maksud*. This requires a deep understanding of the Malay language, its idioms, old sayings, and proverbs.

Let us look again at the same *panton*.

Dua tiga kucing berlari,	Two three cats running like mad,
Mana sama si kucing belang.	The spotted one is special.
Dua tiga dapat di chari,	Several friends I have been looking at,
Mana sama tuan seorang.	You are the one exceptional.

In this *panton* the *pembayang maksud* has a phrase, *kucing belang* or spotted cat, that subtly gives the clue to the theme. To the more discerning listener, *kucing belang* refers to *kucing jalang* or a mating cat. The singer is telling his lover that he is like



## ■ TRADITIONS ■

a cat in a mating mood. So what is coarse and crude is discreetly implied in a refined manner without being overtly offensive.

Let us take a look at the *pembayang maksud* of a popular *panton* often sung at parties.

Kalau tidak kerana bulan,	If not for the sake of the moon,
Tidak bintang bersinar pagi.	The stars will not twinkle.
Kalau tidak kerana tuan,	If it is not for your sake,
	as a boon,
Tidak saya datang kemari.	I will not be here single.

Here, the singer is serenading his lover. Though the words appear plain and simple, the *pembayang maksud* paints a wonderful night befitting of their rendezvous. At the same time, *bulan* (moon) and *bintang* (stars) allude to his feelings for her, as a reference to the saying *bulan di pagar bintang* (a moon surrounded by stars in the night sky) which is often used to describe a woman of great beauty. It is implied then that the lover is most beautiful like "a moon surrounded by stars".

Try to compose a *panton* by following these rules. Remember, the first two lines are not just meant to rhyme. The *pembayang maksud* is vital to the theme and the implication must be subtle.

Here is a rousing *panton* suitable for gatherings:

Hari ini merendang jagong,	Today we fry maize,
Hari besok merendang sereh (serai).	Tomorrow we fry lemongrass.
Hari ini kita berkampung,	Today we are together by grace,
Hari besok kita bercherai.	Tomorrow we part at last.

The *pembayang maksud* describes two different activities which parallel the reflection that on different days we encounter different situations.

Kalu ada sumur di ladang,	If in the farm there is a well,
Mari kita bertumpang mandi.	Let us bathe together.
Kalu ada umur panjang,	If we live long and well,
Bila kita berjumpa lagi.	We shall meet again together.

The *pembayang maksud* in the *panton* above is a proposal to be open and daring, and introduces an immense sense of romance, lust and caution. What can happen when a boy and a girl bathe together? Is it implied that a relationship has already developed? If their next meeting place should be at a well, it appears that their union seems a remote possibility. The lovers may have to wait their whole lives to be together. But he leaves his conclusion open-ended; he yearns and hopes for a chance of coming together again. ❀

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Papaya Masak Titek

# MARI KITA MAKAN

Malay and Indian influences on Peranakan cuisine.

By Noreen Chan

If Chinese norms and traditions form the basis of Peranakan cooking, then it is the cultures of Southeast Asia that add the colour, the zest, the “Peranakan-ness”. Hundreds of years ago, when our forefathers came to this part of the world on ships borne by the monsoon winds, they would have found the environment very different from what they were used to. The people, food, language, practically every aspect of daily life would have been new. Through intermarriage and the process of acculturalisation, a new expression would eventually emerge to become recognised as the Peranakan way of life.

In cooking, this adaptation meant the incorporation of local ingredients and cooking methods. Lemongrass, coconut milk, *belachan*, local herbs and aromatics, in fact all our *lauk rempah* derives from our Malay and Indonesian neighbours, as do most of our *kueh kueh*. While Chinese cooking does not often feature raw vegetables, the Peranakans enjoy “*ulam*” (raw or lightly blanched herbs), whether mixed with rice (as in *nasi ulam*) or as an accompaniment to *sambal* dishes.

My great-grandmother used to enjoy *buah belinjo* (*Gnetum gnemon*) after dinner, cracking the shells to get the bitterish seeds. We probably know *belinjo* better in its cracker form, known as *krepek* or *empeng*. The dark green leaves are delicious for *masak lemak* (cooked in spicy coconut milk) a *la sayur lodeh*; alternatively you can use bamboo shoots, young jackfruit or the young fern tips known as *puchok pakis*.

There are dishes or concoctions in the Peranakan repertoire that are typically Malay or Indonesian, such as *Chinchalok*, *Gerang Assam*, *Roti Jala*, *Sambal Udang Masak Petai* or Beef

*Rendang*. But some of our other “signature” dishes are truly fusion cuisine, such as *Ayam Buah Keluak*, *Babi Tohay* and *Masak Titek*. *Ikan Masak Asam Pekat* is a family favourite; it is not very difficult to cook as the *rempah* need not be fried but just boiled in tamarind water. The task of boning the *ikan parang* (wolf herring) is tedious, but when I think of the flaked fish smothered with gravy topped by a dollop of *sambal belachan* or a few pieces of green chilli, to be mixed and mopped up with *yutiao* (*you char kway* or fried dough sticks), all the effort is always worth it.

Indian influence on Peranakan cooking is less obvious perhaps, but no less significant. *Nyonya Curry* is the prime example; this is a Madras-style curry that does not use coconut milk. Many *bibiks* had little cottage industries producing curry powder, usually packed in recycled ketchup bottles. My *Koh Poh* in Malacca did this into her 70’s. She painstakingly washed and sun-dried all the ingredients, before bringing them to the friendly curry powder factory to grind into powder. There are as many recipes as *bibiks* who ever made their own mixes. One example is reproduced at the end of this article. Families with curry leaf trees (*Murraya koenigii*) in their gardens would receive regular requests for the aromatic leaves, which are dried and ground as part of the curry powder mix or added to the dish during cooking.

## Recipes from (where else) Mama’s book

### PAPAYA MASAK TITEK

The term *titek* refers to the quartet of chilli, *bawang merah*





Sambal Kim Chum

(shallots), *buah keras* (candelnuts) and *belachan* that form the basis of *rempah titek* or *rempah chilli bawang*. *Masak titek* is best described as a spicy soup with bamboo shoot, tofu (usually with minced pork balls) and, as is the case here, semi-ripe papaya. The flavour of the dish is much enhanced by the addition of salt fish bones, especially from *ikan kurau*.

1 medium papaya semi-ripe, cut into pieces  
300g small prawns, shelled  
*Puchot kunyit* and *kemangi* (young turmeric and Asian basil leaves)

**Rempah** – to grind:

25 shallots  
1 1/2 sq inch *belachan*  
80 peppercorns or 1 tsp powder  
2 fresh chillies seeded

**Method:** Bring *rempah* to boil with a bowl of water until the raw smell of onions disappears. Add papaya, salt, light soya sauce, a pinch of sugar and prawns. As soon as the papaya is soft, add *kemangi* and *kunyit* leaves. Serve with *sambal belachan*.

#### SAMBAL KIM CHUM (a variation of Sambal Jantung)

*Jantung pisang* (literally banana heart) is the bud of the banana flower, which is edible. The hard outer covering is peeled off and the bud shredded and boiled, to be eaten as a salad. This recipe uses dried lily buds or *kim chum* (golden needles).

- 1 handful *kim chum*, cut off the hard ends and boil until tender. Squeeze out water and shred.
- 1 cucumber, skinned and cut 1 1/2 inch long (1/2" wide). Discard centre.
- 12 – 14 *belimbing*, cut like the cucumber.
- 1/2 kg fresh prawns, steamed and shelled, for garnishing.
- 1 green and 1 red chilli, sliced, for garnishing.

- 2 1/2 sq inch *belachan*, roasted and pounded with 3-4 red chillies for *sambal belachan*.

- Coconut sauce: 1 1/2 grated coconut, squeezed to make 2 cups of *santan* (milk). Add 1 1/2 tsp salt, 2 tsp sugar to taste. Stir constantly over low fire. When about to boil, thicken with 3 tbsp cornflour mixed with 5 tbsp water. Must not be too thick. Cool. This can be done ahead.

**Method:** Mix 1, 2, 3 and 6. Mix in a bit of 7 to wet the mixture. Transfer to a plate, top off with a little more 7 and garnish with 4 and 5. Serve.

To taste even better, squeeze one or two *lemo kesturi* (calamansi) over the sambal, slice the *lemo* skin very thinly and sprinkle on top.

#### SAMBAL BELIMBING

*Belimbing*, or *blingbing* - not to be confused with starfruit or carambola - is a sour fruit. This dish brings back memories for my mother. In her childhood, it was a dish that featured at picnics and outings as it did not need to be heated up and also travelled well. It was traditionally eaten with ketupat but was still a treat with steaming hot rice.

30-40 *belimbing*, cut off the tops and bottoms and slice into circles. Mix in 3 tbsp salt and leave for a while until soft and runny. Squeeze out the water.

1 1/2 coconut, squeezed into no. 1 and no. 2 *santan*  
1/2 kg small prawns  
1 big slice *lengkuas*  
2 stalks *seray*, bruised

**Rempah:** 8 shallots, 2 chillies, 6 garlic, 2 *seray* – all sliced fine and fried. Set aside half for garnishing.

**Method:** In hot oil, fry 1 sq inch of *belachan* mixed with a little water into a paste, add *lengkuas* and *seray*; then add prawns and *santan* (no. 2 coconut milk). Add salt and 5 tbsp sugar to





Nellie Cheng Swee's Perchilis Terong



Tua Kim's Gulai Pok Hoe with ikan bawal (pomfret)





Ingredients for Mrs Hock Chuan's curry powder

taste. Let boil, add *belimbing* and taste again. Add no. 1 milk and stir in half of the fried sliced ingredients.

Serve in a dish garnished with the remaining half of the fried ingredients.

#### GULAI POK HOE (from Tua Kim Poh)

What makes a *gulai*? It is hard to say, as a search through recipe books and the Internet throws up a variety of recipes usually from Penang or Indonesia. This recipe has some interesting features, not least because it uses mint not so much as a flavouring but as a vegetable. It comes from my *Tua Kim Poh* who hails from Penang and brought that aspect of the culture into our family.

18 big shallots

$\frac{3}{4}$  – 1 inch *kunyet* (turmeric) ground or pounded into *rempah*

1 stalk *serai*

6 - 8 dried red chillies (soak in hot water)

1 sq inch *belachan* (roasted)

1 bundle mint leaves

1 piece boned salt fish (optional)

*Kurau* or *bawal* fish or 300 gm medium sized prawns

$\frac{2}{3}$  tbsp *asam jawa*

Salt and sugar

Prawn cube or chicken granules

**Method:** Cut the prawn heads and tails off. Mix *asam jawa* with a little water.

Boil the *rempah*, add the *asam* water, salt and sugar. Add in the prawns only one hour before dinner to soak in the gravy. Remove the prawns to a bowl before putting in the mint leaves.

Alternatives: long beans, lady's fingers, brinjals with fish or prawns.

Can substitute with *ikan selar/kekek*, pineapple and *kemangi*.

#### CURRY POWDER (Mrs Hock Chuan)

1 kati *jintan manis* (fennel seed *Foeniculum vulgare*)

1 kati *jintan puteh* (cumin seed *Cuminum cyminum*)

1 kati *chilli kering* (dried chillis)

2  $\frac{1}{2}$  kati *ketumbar* (coriander seed)

$\frac{1}{4}$  kati *kunyet* (turmeric)

$\frac{1}{2}$  tahlil white pepper

1 kati *kayu manis* (cinnamon)

6 kati *kas kas* (poppy seed)

$\frac{1}{2}$  kati *buah pelaga* (cardamom)

It is so easy nowadays to buy curry powder that it is hard to imagine that two generations ago, if you didn't make it yourself, you would have to buy it from someone who did.

#### PERCHILIS TERONG (BRINJAL) (Nellie Cheng Swee)

There are many recipes for this dish. Some call for curry powder. All use curry leaves. The *rempah* ingredients have a distinct Indian influence – fennel, cumin and in another recipe from a family friend Madam Aloya, even cardamom and *halba* (fenugreek).

500g purple *terong*, trim heads, cut up lengthwise and score the centre

200g prawns, cut heads and feelers

$\frac{1}{2}$  egg-size *assam*, dissolved in 1 bowl water (20oz)

2-3 sprigs curry leaves, to mix in

3 small green and red chillies cut lengthwise

Grind *rempah* finely:

18 dried chillies, seeded

12 shallots

1 tsp *jintan puteh*

$\frac{1}{2}$  inch *kunyet*

1 tsp *jintan manis*

2 sq inch *belachan*

3 cloves,  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch *kayu manis* (cinnamon),  $\frac{1}{2}$  sliced onion

**Method:** Heat  $\frac{1}{3}$  cup oil and fry *rempah*. Add cloves, cinnamon and onion and fry until oil seeps out. Add 1 oz *asam* water, curry leaves and *terong*. When *terong* is soft, add  $1\frac{1}{2}$  tsp salt and 4 tbsp sugar, to taste. Add prawns and bring to boil until prawns are cooked. 𠆞

Photography and styling by Jason Ong.



# THE CHINESE HERITAGE IN SEMARANG

The Chinese heritage is very much evident in Semarang, perhaps the most interesting city in Java, Indonesia.

By George Putrasahan

Chinese migrants were already in Java when Admiral Cheng Ho landed there in the early fifteenth century. All men, they married the local women and started the Peranakan lineage. Similar to Peranakans in the region, they adhered strictly to Chinese traditional values and retained their Chinese surnames while assimilating the language and food. The women retained their local dress.

In the early seventeenth century more Chinese craftsmen came to Semarang. They started building houses like those in China. Some of this old building style can still be seen in the old Market Street (*Gang Baru*) in the Pecinan area. Originally for Chinese traders, it has become a general market for all races. The oldest Temple in Semarang is also located here. Nearby is the main road which locals know as *Cap Kao Keng*, referring to the 19 buildings built by a rich Chinese merchant to house new immigrants from China.

## Chinese temples abound

The most famous temple in Semarang is the *Sam Po Kong*, dating back to the fifteenth century when Admiral Cheng Ho's Chief Helmsman, Ong King Hong, a Muslim, fell sick and could not continue the journey home. He stayed behind in Simongan (near Semarang) with his subordinates. It is said that he started to build a place of worship to honor Cheng Ho, who is also known as *Sam Po Toa Lang*. Later, more Chinese worshipped here and built it up to its present size. Ong's grave is near the temple compound. The local Javanese Muslims treat it as a sacred place as well.

Every year, on the last day of the sixth month (*lak gwee*) of the Chinese calendar, there is a procession

for *Sam Po Toa Pek Kong*, accompanied by a dragon troupe and horsemen, symbolizing the Admiral. The route goes from the main *Tay Kak Sie* temple in Gang Lombok to the *Sam Po Kong* temple.

The largest temple in Semarang, the *Tay Kak Sie* temple built in 1771, is in Gang Lombok (Pecinan or Chinatown). It is the hub of major Chinese traditional celebrations such as Chinese New Year.

Next door is a beautiful Chinese-style building, belonging to an association called *Tji Lam Tjai* which provides free medical services to the poor. The building was formerly the *Kong Kwan*, a meeting place for the Chinese Peranakan community leaders to settle problems within the community. During Dutch colonial rule in 1821 a government ruling limited the movements of residents in Semarang, especially the Chinese population, who required a special permit to leave the Chinatown area. The ruling made it difficult for the



The Tji Lam Tjai Building (formerly Kong Kwan).



The oldest temple in Semarang, Sam Po Kang.



The main temple, Tay Kak Sie.



# LEADING THE PERANAKAN VOICES

By Angelina Choo

"Every singer will have his or her own personality."

And that is what The Peranakan Voices is all about. A *rempah* of singers larger than life, coming together to form a unique identity of its own. Never have I thought that working with The Peranakan Voices would be very different from my experiences with other choirs. Helming this exciting group of people has been a thrilling joyride for me, a glimpse into the world of those aged but young at heart.

Bearing remnant scars from previous brushes and collisions, the choir has now moved beyond an unpleasant past to concentrate on establishing greater self-discipline, commitment and consistency in their attitudes within and without performances, above merely learning about proper singing technique and the mechanics of harmony. The choir has managed to refocus its energies through each member's intrinsic motivations, putting aside personal differences to



Angelina (middle, in black) with the choir.

discover the joy in creating music.

Perhaps the greatest aspect of this choir has been the ability to remain steadfast in the toughest of times. It was difficult initially to stand my ground as a conductor. However, in time, I realized how the choir was so different in itself - that it had set its own goals and was already on its merry way, especially when some of the members were more senior and experienced in the domain of Peranakan music.

Ultimately, there was consensus. It was this consensus that enabled us to perform for everybody and everywhere, in all sorts of places. I must say it has been, and will always be, enjoyable to go for rehearsals every week. My husband and I are both rather quiet by nature and are therefore attracted to the lively banter of this fantastic group of people.

Indeed, I am proud of The Peranakan Voices. We have come this far, with farther to go. It is

only right that we continue to lend our support to this amazing group of people, who will continue to share with us the joy of life in celebrating their own music. ㊦

*With thanks to Jeremy Chua for his help with this article.*

*Angelina is the founder and artistic director of the A Cappella Society, which conducts training workshops, camps and programmes for budding singers in this genre.*

*Visit [www.a-cappella.org.sg](http://www.a-cappella.org.sg).*

## The Chinese Heritage in Semarang (continued from page 27)

Peranakan Chinese to expand their businesses.

The Wee Wie Kiong temple, clan house for the TAN surname, was founded by a rich Chinese by the name of Tan Tiang Tjhing in 1814. The LIEM surnames built their clan house (See Huo Kiong) in 1881 to worship their main deity, Ma Chu Po. The building is well preserved in its original form.

Another association building is the Boon Yan Tong, now known as Rasa Dharma. It has become a social institution for all ethnic groups. The building is totally renovated, leaving only the roof showing the influence of Chinese architecture.

### Oei Tiong Ham (a Peranakan from Semarang)

A study of the Chinese influence on the cultural heritage of Semarang will not be complete without mentioning Oei Tiong Ham. His father left China (Fukien) for Semarang, where he started from scratch and became very successful



The Liem clan temple (facade and interior).

in business. He formed the Kian Gwan concern. In 1890 his son Oei Tiong Ham took over, turning it into a conglomerate with the main business in sugar. He was known as the Sugar King and became even richer when he obtained a licence from the Dutch government to trade in opium.

In 1924 Oei died in Singapore and was buried in Semarang near the Sam Po Kong temple. Later his grave was moved out of Semarang. The Kian Gwan concern was nationalized by the Government in 1960. ㊦



# INTRODUCING THE NEW PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

*You would never guess there are so many Peranakans Down Under. And, it is really a small world.*

By Linda Chee

It all started with an exhibition of sarong kebaya in Melbourne a year ago in May. The kebayas, from the collection of the late Datin Seri Endon of Malaysia, were matched with batik sarongs from Baba Peter Wee, our own Association Vice-President (see issue July-September 2007).

The exhibition opening involved Melbourne Peranakans like Baba Alfred Chi Teck Yam, who came together to entertain guests with songs and dances. Warmed by the response and feeling so at home speaking patois with their kind, Alfred and his merry band of Peranakans decided not to lose the momentum, following up with a pot-luck dinner after the exhibition ended. Their "Oz-tok panjang" dinner at the Lions Club Hall surprisingly attracted over 80 people.

Peranakans young and old as well as Australian friends joined in to feast, joget and even enjoy a skit led by young Glenda Chi, Alfred's daughter, acting as the matriarch (below). How apt to have the presence of Peter Wee, the cultural doyen, to show one and all the right way to joget.

Encouraged by Peter to form an association of their own, Alfred received enthusiastic commitment from the many nyonyas and babas who readily pledged commitment. Many meetings followed. When I was in Melbourne in early March, I had the privilege of meeting up with the committee members at a meeting to endorse their constitution.

The Peranakan Association of Australia was approved by the authorities within a fortnight. While growing membership is their overriding goal, the immediate priority is to draw up



The new Association, formed with 33 founding members, is led by President Alfred Chi (seated in middle). Office bearers include Secretary David Neo (seated next to Alfred), Vice-President Doreen Wong and Treasurer Katrina Tay (seated to the right of Alfred).

a calendar of events to bring Peranakans residing in Australia closer to their culture. In the works are celebrating events such as the Kueh Chang Festival, Moon Cake Festival and Chinese New Year, which they had earlier celebrated on 16 February.

## First official event

The association's first official event is an "Entertaining the Elderly Peranakan" lunch on 20 April. The dozen elders and 35 members who signed on will enjoy authentic Nyonya cuisine as they reminisce (*melayteh melayteh*) down memory lane to *dondang sayang* and other Peranakan songs.

"We want to give back something to society, especially our own kind, as to settle in a new country without many relatives and friends can be pretty lonely. If this proves successful we hope to pamper our elders more often," said Alfred.

For me, spending time with the Australian Association members was a homecoming of sorts. It is a common ice-breaker among old families in Malacca to trace any connections from their surnames, often to discover that everybody is related to everybody! In a process called *tarek mee sua* (pulling the noodle), we have this intriguing investigation of who-is-married-to-whom and whose-grandfather-and-whose-father are brothers, etc.

So I discovered that I am related, distantly but still related, to Alfred and his wife Soo Neo Tan. And I have a "new" uncle in founding member, Toh Swee Hin. With my cousin Patrick Low (father's side) also in the committee, I am closer to the Peranakans in Melbourne than any one would have guessed. ❀





# SAYANG SAYANG

Channel 5 comedy starting  
Wednesday 4 June.



Watch our own Baba John Lee (in red jacket) on mainstream TV as it goes *Peranakan* with a new prime time serial, *Sayang Sayang*. The plot is described as "a spicy, funky recipe for drama, conflict, disaster...and laughter".

John plays Larry, a mild-mannered man with only one passion, to pen the definitive *Peranakan* dictionary. He is married to Nelly, a matriarchal towkay neo of a mother-in-law, who runs Singapore's most famous nyonya kueh chang business. Larry's second mother, Pearlie, had her plans to become the matriarch foiled by Nelly. Bent on revenge, Pearlie bides her time as Larry's father had willed that the successor to the business must have an heir by age 30.

Nelly's playboy son, Marcus, has other ideas. He presents to his desperate mother a tomboy ex-classmate, Li Choo, to be his one and only choice. It's a hilarious battle of wills among the three strong-willed women and a delightful show of tradition in the family as through the twists and turns, we see Li Choo the butcher's daughter through her gradual transformation into a graceful nyonya.

The stellar casting includes Tan Kheng Hua as Nelly, Lok Meng Chue as Pearlie and Michelle Chong as Li Choo.

The half-hour episodes air on Channel 5, Wednesdays at 8.00 pm for 13 weeks starting from 4 June. ㊟

## PENANG CONFERENCE ON PERANAKAN CHINESE AND CHINESE MUSLIMS

Joint organisers: Penang Writers Association (KARYAWAN), Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang (PPCPP) and Department of Heritage, Ministry of Culture, Art and Heritage, Malaysia (KEKKWA), in cooperation with The Star newspaper and Muslim Converts Association of Malaysia (PERKIM)

Sunday, 24 February, 2008 • Penang Equatorial Hotel

By Cedric Tan

The day-long conference delved into two Chinese sub-communities living in Penang: the vibrant Peranakan Chinese, whose presence can be felt and seen in the city of Georgetown and the lesser known Chinese Muslims whose ancestors formed colonies in the jetties along the southern coast of Georgetown. After two postponements last year, the conference was successfully held, attracting about 200 participants from University Sains Malaysia, PPCPP and various

research bodies from Singapore such as the National University of Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum and Singapore National Archives.

The event was declared open by the Governor of Penang, Tun Dato' Seri Utama Haji Abdul Rahman b. Haji Abbas. The keynote address by Professor Emeritus Dato Dr. Khoo Kay Kim stressed the importance of history studies and their contributions to agriculture and literature.

Rosey Wang Ma traced the migration of Hui and Sanya Muslims from Southern China and the not-so-rosy legacy of the Chinese Muslims. As a practicing Muslim, she provided examples of the many challenges she and her community faced as they are subtly ostracized by the main traditional Chinese community while not accepted as 'Malay' due to their insistence of being ethnically Chinese. Dr Sohaimi Abdul Aziz looked at Malay literature relating to Admiral Cheng Ho and the inter-marriages after the Chinese arrived in the Malay Peninsula while Mr Thanin Salam spoke on Muslims in Chiangmai.

The many other speakers at the conference included Dato Seri Khoo Keat Siew, Dr Lim Beng Soon, Dr Tan Sooi Beng, Dr Neil Khor, Michael Cheah, Ui Ghim, Grace Choong, Dr Lee Su Kim and Charles Chua. ㊟





## THE NEW 2008/2010 GENERAL COMMITTEE OF THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION

108th Annual General Meeting • 29 March 2008 • Singapore Regional English Language Centre

By Chan Eng Thai

It was in the wind that the AGM was to be a highly charged affair, with upsets galore of the incumbent office bearers. But as it happened, they were all “*angin tak-ah asap*”, merely wind and no smoke at all! The AGM was well attended though, by members from across the wide spectrum of interests.

Mr Lee Kip Lee, our venerable President, started the AGM by urging members to unite. This was because 2008 would be a busy year for the PA, with events including the openings of the Peranakan Museum on 26 April and the Baba House in September.

True enough, all the “*angin*” that a coup was to be staged that day was put to rest when Uncle Kip was unanimously re-elected President, unopposed, for another two years.

In like manner, the 1st and 2nd Vice-President slots were filled by Mr Peter Wee and Mrs Khoo-Ong Poh Neo, respectively. Mrs Lim Geok Huay retained the Honorary Secretary's post, Mr Gavin Ooi was elected as Assistant Secretary while Mr Alan Koh clinched the Treasure's position. All were

nominated unopposed.

The six positions of committee members were however, contested as there were eight nominations for the six slots. Voted in, not in the order of merit, were Mr Peter Lee, Ms Bebe Seet, Mr Ee Sin Soo, Mr Emeric Lau, Mrs Monica Alsagoff and Mr Chan Eng Thai.

After the “*angin*” blew the dust away, and the election was over, members were treated to *laksa*, *popiah*, *char bee hoon* and *kueh kueh* for tea.

The 108th election of the new committee could best be described in a limerick:

***Hari panas kepala pening,***

***Makan ubat singseh Ah Kee,***

***Jangan dengar khabar angin,***

***Nanti sakit perut sama hati.***

**A hot day and a headache  
I have,**

**Physician Ah Kee's  
medicine I take.**

**Don't listen to rumours galore,  
Else, a tummy and  
heartache you will get!**

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### 2008/2010 COMMITTEE

President	: Mr Lee Kip Lee (re-elected)
1st Vice-President	: Mr Peter Wee (re-elected)
2nd Vice-President	: Mrs Khoo-Ong Poh Neo (re-elected)
Hon. Secretary	: Mrs Lim-Sng Geok Huay (re-elected)
Asst. Hon. Secretary	: Mr Gavin Ooi
Hon. Treasurer	: Mr Alan Koh
Committee Members	: Ms Bebe Seet (re-elected) Mr Peter Lee Mr Chan Eng Thai (re-elected) Mrs Monica Alsagoff Mr Ee Sin Soo

### WELCOME

We welcome our new members:

1. Mrs Catherine Chan
2. Ms Janet Chan Kim Lian
3. Mrs Pauline Cheah-Kovacs
4. Mdm Cheong Kim Chee
5. Mr Alvin Chia Kok Kwang
6. Ms Dolly Choo
7. Mrs Marie-Caroline Dallery
8. Mr Mark Lim Chun Hsien
9. Mr Christopher Jacob Lim Han Lee
10. Mr Albert Lim Peng Ong
11. Mrs Pauline Ong
12. Ms Siow Hua Lin
13. Ms Lorena Tan
14. Dr Jonathan Tan
15. Mr Laurence Tan Sye Kim
16. Mrs Nina Wood
17. Ms Yap Jo Lin
18. Mr Yeo Siong Lim

### OBITUARY

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

1. Mr James Lee Soo Wan
2. Dr Lee Chan Yong
3. Mdm Wee Imm Neo



# THE PERANAKAN GUIDE SINGAPORE

## MUSEUMS

**Peranakan Museum.** Opened on 26 April 2008. See the world's first national Peranakan Museum with the most comprehensive and finest collection of Peranakan artefacts. Be delighted by the vibrant and colourful culture of the Babas and Nonyas. Singapore's newest boutique museum examines the centres of Peranakan culture in Malacca, Penang and Singapore, and traces its links to as far as Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand.

Peranakan Museum, 39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941.  
website: [www.peranakanmuseum.sg](http://www.peranakanmuseum.sg)  
Email: [nhb\\_pm\\_vs@nhb.gov.sg](mailto:nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg)  
Tel: +65 6332 2982.



**National Museum of Singapore.** The museum's Singapore History Gallery pays tribute to the contributions of the pioneering Peranakans. On view are some outstanding artefacts, including the oil portrait of Lim Boon Keng, old photographs, jewellery and sreh sets, as well as the magnificent carved wood hearse of Tan Jiak Kim, which is considered one of the 11 Treasures of the National Museum. National Museum of Singapore, 93 Stamford Road, Tel: 63323659, Opening Hours: 10am to 6pm Daily (Singapore History Gallery), 10am to 9pm Daily (Singapore Living Galleries), Admission \$10 (adults) \$5 (senior citizens above 60), \$5 (students, Nsmen), Free admission to the Singapore Living Galleries from 6pm to 9pm. <http://nationalmuseum.sg>.

**The Baba House — COMING SOON!** This new heritage house museum at 157 Neil Road will open in late 2008. Meanwhile you can 'visit' the house on-line. <http://www.nus.edu.sg/museums/baba/index.html>.

**NUS Museum,** NUS Centre For the Arts, is a comprehensive establishment for teaching and research. It focuses on Asian regional

art and culture and seeks to create an enriching experience through its collections, exhibition practices and partnerships. The Museum has over 7,000 artefacts and artworks from four collections. NUS Museum, NUS Centre For the Arts, 50 Kent Ridge Crescent, Tel: 6516 4617 / 6, Opening Hours: 10am to 7.30pm (Tuesdays to Saturdays), 10am to 6pm on Sundays. Closed on Mondays and Public Holidays. Admission is FREE. [http://www.nus.edu.sg/museums/exhibitions\\_sseac.htm](http://www.nus.edu.sg/museums/exhibitions_sseac.htm). For programmes related to the exhibition, see <http://www.nus.edu.sg/museums/cattoni.html>.

## LANDMARKS

**Blair Plain.** A typical Peranakan residential area around Blair Road, Spottiswoode Park, Neil Road and New Bridge Road that is worth a stroll. Visit Guan Antiques nearby at Kampong Bahru Road, a treasure trove of Peranakan heirlooms. [http://www.arch.nus.edu.sg/SGA/design\\_studio/dds2b/blair/study/Blair.html](http://www.arch.nus.edu.sg/SGA/design_studio/dds2b/blair/study/Blair.html).

**Emerald Hill Road.** Another interesting residential district showcasing the best of eclectic Peranakan domestic architecture, just off Orchard Road.



**Katong and Joo Chiat.** Perhaps the nerve centre of Peranakan life in Singapore. In its heyday it was the site of grand seaside villas and elaborate Peranakan terraced houses. The latter can still be seen in a walk around Koon Seng Road. Also visit Peranakan shops such as Katong Antique House (208 East Coast Road) and Rumah Bebe (113 East Coast Road) as well as the great variety of Peranakan restaurants in the neighbourhood. [http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/what\\_to\\_see/suburban\\_living/katong.html](http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/what_to_see/suburban_living/katong.html). <http://www.myjoochiat.com>.

**Amoy Street and Telok Ayer Street.** Perhaps one of the first Peranakan enclaves. Many

Peranakans from Malacca moved to this area as soon as the East India Company began to lease out land for sale.



**Thian Hock Keng.** The oldest Hokkien temple in Singapore was founded in 1821 although the present structure, built without nails, was completed only in 1841. The temple is dedicated to Mazu, the Daoist goddess of the sea and protector of all seamen. Many of the temple's patrons were Peranakan pioneers, such as Tan Tock Seng, who donated \$30,000 for renovations. He also founded the hospital named after him. The Hokkien Huay Kuan, a community organisation for Hokkien people in Singapore was housed at the temple and also helmed by Peranakan pioneers. Thian Hock Keng, 158 Telok Ayer Street, Tel: 64234616.

**Tan Si Chong Su.** Built in 1878, Tan Si Chong Su is the ancestral temple of the Tan clan, and was founded by prominent Baba philanthropists Tan Kim Ching, son of Tan Tock Seng, and Tan Beng Swee, the son of Tan Kim Seng. The first president of the temple, Tan Kim Tian, was a well-known Baba shipping tycoon. The temple consists of shrines for the ancestral tablets of Tan clansmen, as well as altars to the clan deities. The elaborate stone and wood carvings as well as the swooping ceramic roof finials makes this one of the most elaborate Chinese temples in Singapore, quaintly located amid the gleaming towers of the financial district. Tan Si Chong Su, 15 Magazine Road.







THE  
PERANAKAN  
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