



A SWIRL OF BLESSINGS

Dear Babas, Nyonyas and Friends

The Peranakan calendar has zipped through, just like that, and will likely be another hectic swirl of activities in 2009. Looking back, 2008 was a *berlian* of a landmark. To name a few highlights: The new Peranakan Museum and Baba House. New affiliates set up in Melbourne and Kuala Lumpur. Beautiful heritage books such as children's stories by Adeline Foo and *Junk to Jewels* by Peter Lee, which was launched recently and is featured on page 27. Association membership continues to climb, at last count, to 1,870 members.

Enthusiasm for all things Peranakan has indeed heightened. Just look at the sizzling reception to the boutique museum, which is set to see an astounding 180,000 visitors in just one year. Collecting interest has also surged. The recent talk by *collector extraordinaire* Mrs Betty Mariette pulled in full-house attendance. And so Colin Chee takes the opportunity to extract some collecting wisdom from Mrs Mariette herself on page 14.

From the quaint to the quirky, this issue brings yet again a range of interesting reads. In the next page, Peter Lee

picks from the theme of the Peranakan Ball – *Victorian Flair* – to indulge in the erstwhile Peranakan fixation with Britannia. William Gwee recollects, in the first of a two-part series, how spirits had abundant play on the Peranakan household of past generations. And the spirited young have drawn spunky inspiration from a recent incident to stage a play on subcultures, reviewed by Emeric Lau on page 29.

We applaud schools that have taken the cultural initiative to educate the very young, such as CHIJ Lady of Good Counsel on page 35. For those who say the Peranakan culture is dying, I would like to commend the fine effort of one young Baba in his 20s who sent us a lovely romantic *panton*, which I could not resist including below. I have not used his name as he prefers to be known by the pseudonym Jati Trang. How apt.

We count our blessings.

Happy 2009.

Linda

■ PANTON ■

NYANYIAN KEKASEH (A CLASSICALLY INSPIRED LOVE POEM)

By Jati Trang*

Si Baba:

**Sebalek batu sang kura-kura,
Ke kali hendak merangkak perigi;
Detik ku-tunggu, saat ku-kira,
Menanti datangnya malam ini.**

*Little tortoise behind a pebble mount,
Crawls surely to the well near;
The moment yearned, the seconds I count;
Alas tonight the moment's here.*

Si Nyonya:

**Tratay tumbuh di atas paya,
Begitu merah warna-nya diri;
Bagi putek mula berbunga,
Begitu indah saat-nya ini.**

*Out of the marsh, a lotus growing,
Pink and lovely it stands in peace;
Like a flower of spring blooming,
How beautiful this moment is.*

Si Baba:

**Timor barat utara slatan,
Matari pagi, bintang malam;
Besair hajat, tinggi harapan,
Dengair-lah dinda janji ku-tanam.**

*Far as the four directions of the Earth,
Constant as the sun and stars of the sky;*

*A great wish and hope I lay to birth,
Listen, hush, my promise from the heart,
speak I.*

Si Nyonya:

**Telok Blangah, Tanjong Bidara,
Tongkang prahu laboh di jeti;
Apa dirasa biair bichara,
Ku-pasang kuping, ku-bukak ati.**

*From Blangah Bay to the Bidara Cape,
The ships at pier are resting hard;
What's in your mind let it escape,
My ears are opened, so is my heart.*

Si Baba:

**Pukul rebana, pukul taboh,
Berdegok berganjak bunyi irama;
Aku berkata dengan sunggoh,
Idop ku-ajak kongsi bersama?**

*Hit the drums, let it be hard,
A thumping sound, a melody of wonder;
All my might and all my heart,
I ask to share this life together?*

Si Nyonya:

**Senyom diri anak nlayan,
Sudah meliat prahu di laot;**

Sepenoh ati kita katakan,

Tangan dihulor dinda menyambot.

*A smile from the fishermen's daughter,
She's seen the boats rowing back from
yonder;
My heart's filled with laughter,
The hand you stretch, I embrace tender.*

Si Baba:

**Trang awan bersama chahaya,
Matari terbit satep pagi;
Kumbang akan menjaga bunga,
Janji ku tanam di lubok ati.**

*Bright is the sky, white clouds over,
The mighty sun rises each day;
The bug shall cherish its pretty flower,
A promise lodged in my soul today.*

Si Nyonya:

**Ke laot India, ke laot Sunda,
Anak kapal pergi ber-iring;
Ke mana kanda, ke situ dinda,
Sama memikol, sama menjinjing.**

*To the Indian Ocean or the Sundanese Sea,
How a ship shall follow its master;
Wherever you go, there I shall be,
In thick and thin, our love together.*

* Jati trang (bright and pure) is a term that refers to the true Peranakan.

Copyright is held by the publisher. All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced without the permission of the publisher.

The Editor of The Peranakan and The Peranakan Association disclaim all responsibilities in the articles published herein, and state that the views expressed in them, if any, are those of the writers and not theirs. They assume no responsibility for unsolicited materials or articles published herein and state that the writers are wholly responsible for the veracity and authenticity of their articles.

THE QUEEN'S CHINESE

Peter Lee wallows in trivia, with his reflections on the Peranakans' love affair with Royal Britain.

Lurking somewhere deep in the recesses of the soul of the fervently nationalistic Singaporean Peranakan, is a very un-PC fixation with British royalty. Every Baba family has a closet royalist, who can name you all Queen Victoria's nine children. After all, how many Edwards, Alices, Alfreds and Arthurs do we all know? Although I must say I don't know any Nyonya called Victoria, Helena, Louise or Beatrice. And perhaps Leopold was too Germanic for your typical Baba family.

My grandmother Tan Guat Poh kept her Union Jack by her side till the day she died, and as my father recalled, dreaded the day Singapore became independent. In one of the halls of the house in Malacca where she grew up, still hangs a fragile old print of the queen with her consort Prince Albert, and her many children. Sadly, I inherited this royal fixation. One of my childhood hobbies was to draw an enormous chart of all Queen Elizabeth's ancestors. The information was easy to find. My father had a set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and in those days it had pages and pages of useless information concerning the genealogies of all the royal and aristocratic families of Europe, even of the most obscure mountain principedoms in Lithuania and Karelia and Transylvania.

While other kids were watching *Lassie* and *Ultraman*, I was unhealthily focused on studying the links between the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and that of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Glücksburg. (That's an easy one actually: King Edward VII belonged to the former, and Queen Alexandra and Prince Philip to the latter.) Later when I grew up I would borrow royal biographies

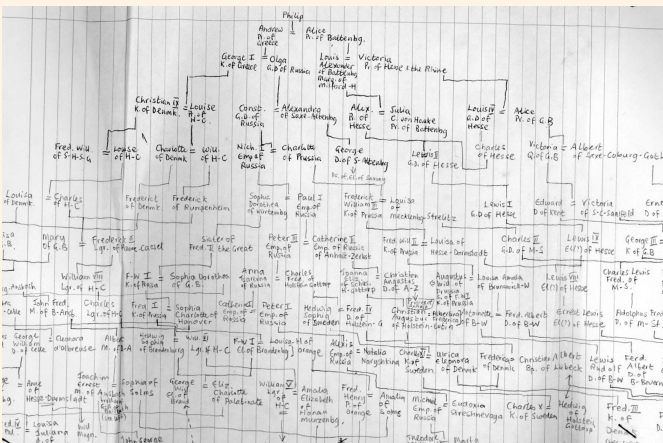
belonging to my uncles and aunts and pillage old piles of *Majesty*, which I would read with as much public embarrassment and private glee as I do today with *Hello* magazine.

I wonder if the Singaporean Baba's fascination with all

this royal trivia has anything to do with the coincidental fact that Queen Victoria was born on 24 May 1819, just four months after Stamford Raffles's expedition landed on Singapore's shores on 29 January. By 6 February, a treaty had been ratified with the Sultan of Johore. She ascended the throne on 20 June 1837 and reigned until her death on 22 January 1901.

In his book, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, Song Ong Siang mentions the first lucky Babas to set eyes on her royal presence. They were: his father Song Hoot Kiam and his classmate Lee Kim Lin, who were sent to study in England by Reverend James Legge. In 1848 they were honoured with a private audience with the young

Queen and Prince Albert. Rev. Legge later wrote, "Our audience was very pleasant and courteous on the part of the Queen and His Royal Highness. He is a fine, handsome, gentlemanly-looking man, and she is a sweet, quiet little body. She was dressed simply and unpretendingly... Our conversation was all about China and the lads. The boys were much taken by surprise, having been expecting to see a person gorgeously dressed with a crown and all the other paraphernalia of royalty." (Song, p. 77-78)



Childhood obsession: My chart of the ancestors of Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh



Queen Victoria at her Diamond Jubilee, 1897.



Governor Sir Cecil Smith, Seah Liang Seah and some of the donors in Manchu court robes, at the unveiling of the statue of Queen Victoria at Government House, 1889. (Song, facing p. 249).

In June 1887, the Chinese community presented their congratulations to the Queen on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee in the presence of the colonial government at the Town Hall. Seah Liang Seah read the address, which was printed on crimson silk. In this speech he noted that in the Straits Settlements 'no less than 172,000 of our fellow-countrymen have found a home, and learnt to appreciate the just and wise laws, and the strong but equitable government of the land of their adoption.' (Song, p. 228)

However the greatest expression of Peranakan Chinese devotion to the Queen was the commissioning and gift of an almost 2 metre high Sicilian marble statue of her likeness, which was presented to the then-Governor of Singapore, Sir Cecil Clementi, in February 1889 and placed in the Victoria Room of Government House. Seah Liang Seah again represented the community and the 34 subscribers, who had donated money to the Statue Fund two years

girls, in full Chinese costume.'

The SCBA also presented the royal couple with a leather bound album decorated with Chinese silver fittings, of over one hundred photographs from the studio of G.R. Lambert & Co., including, as Song Ong Siang notes, an image of 'children in their lovely New Year dresses'. (Song, p.325)

Later that year the Chinese Company of the Singapore Volunteer Infantry (SVI) was formed and the following year, 50 members of the SVI were invited to take part in the coronation of King Edward VII. The Chinese company of the SVI was represented by Sergeant Lim Boon Keng, and Corporal Song Ong Siang, among others. (Song, p. 333)

When Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught (the brother of King Edward VII) and his wife Princess Louise visited Singapore in February 1907 during the Chinese New Year season, a lantern procession of soldiers from the Chinese Company of the SVI greeted the royal party. Tan Jiak Kim (the first President of the SCBA) read the welcome address to the Duke, and presented three silk banners with Chinese characters couched in gold thread.

Four years later, Tan Jiak Kim and his wife attended the coronation of King George V at Westminster Abbey, as representatives of Singapore, and during this trip were presented to the King and Queen. Tragically, Mrs Tan passed away during her stay in London.

By the 1900s the rage for royalty reached its apogee among the Babas. Peranakan brides were described as *raja sehari*, or 'empress for a day', but with the amount of diamonds festooned on the Nyonya bride, the model was certainly not the Empress of China but rather the Empress of India.

Singapore's Diamond Queen herself, Mrs Lee Choon Guan, got to visit the real one, Queen Mary, at a Buckingham palace garden party, in the early 1920s. Song Ong Siang

recorded that 'During her last trip to Europe she was presented at Court by Lady Tudor. She was commanded to attend a Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace, and, though the gathering was huge, she had the honour of a personal conversation with Their Majesties the King and Queen. The King expressed the pleasure it gave him to see Mrs Lee Choon Guan in Chinese attire, which he much admired.' (Song, p. 542)



Mrs Lee Choon Guan often wore her MBE medal on her birthday, c. 1960s.



The SCBA pagoda, erected in honour of the visit of the Duke & Duchess of York, 1901 (Song, facing p. 325).

earlier. The sculptor was the Polish-born Emanuel Edward Geflowski (1834-1898), who lived and worked in Liverpool. The statue was moved to the Victoria Memorial Hall in the mid 1960s, and then ignominiously moved to a store room in the National Museum in the 1980s, where it languished for a decade before being lovingly restored (including repairing a broken nose) by a conservationist from the Victoria & Albert Museum, and displayed in the grounds of the Istana.

In April 1901, the Duke and Duchess of York (the future King George V and Queen Mary) stopped in Singapore en route to Australia. The Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA), which had been founded the year before, and was the former name of The Peranakan Association, erected a truly Peranakan structure to welcome them — a pagoda surmounted by a figure of Britannia holding a torch! The Duchess 'was presented with a bouquet of the choicest flowers from Mr Choa Kim Keat's gardens by a daughter of Mr Seah Liang Seah, who was attended by six other Chinese

The Peranakans were particularly proud of the colonial medals they received. In 1912 Tan Jiak Kim received the CMG (Companion of the Order of St Michael & St George) from Governor Sir Arthur Young. King George V originally established the Order of the British Empire in 1917, to honour the many civilians who served during World War 1. Mrs Lee was awarded the MBE in 1918. Her cousin Tan Cheng Lock was conferred his knighthood in 1952 (Knight Commander, Order of the British Empire, or KBE). Song Ong Siang received the OBE in 1927 and his KBE in 1936. Another Singaporean recipient was Lim Han Hoe, who together with Song Ong Siang, were at one time presidents of The Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA, former name of The Peranakan Association). Tan Cheng Lock was also president of the Malacca branch of the SCBA.

One of the reasons for the awards was the massive donations by the Babas for the British war effort during World War 1. In 1915 Tan Jiak Kim donated \$18,000 to the Prince of Wales' Relief Fund and \$19,200 (£2,250) for a fighter plane bearing his name. (Song, p. 196) In all, 53 planes were donated by Malaya, including "Malaya No. 6", which was donated by Lee Choon Guan and his brother-in-law Lim Peng Siang (Song, p. 518).

Oei Hui Lan, the daughter of Javanese sugar king Oei Tiong Ham and wife of Chinese diplomat Wellington Koo, was perhaps the first global jet set Nyonya from this part of the world. As the Chinese ambassador in Paris, London and Washington, Koo and his wife moved in the highest political and social circles in China, France, Britain and America. When Wellington Koo was appointed Chinese ambassador at the Court of St James during World War 2, they made frequent courtesy calls to King George VI and Queen Elizabeth at Buckingham Palace. Queen Mary became a personal friend, and often invited Madame Koo for tea. 'I always canceled my plans and went, carrying the biggest bunch of flowers I could find in London.' (Koo, 1975, p. 239) Queen Mary also visited the Koo's once. A Chinese meal was prepared, and as Madame Koo recalled, 'afterwards she and I smoked companionably. When the word came



Left: Tan Jiak Kim, wearing the star-shaped CMG medal, c. 1912 (photograph courtesy of Tan Tiang Teck).



Right: Tan Cheng Lock wearing his KBE medals, among others, at home in Heeren Street, Malacca, c. 1952 (photograph courtesy of Agnes Tan).

that the photographers were waiting outside, and would like to take photographs in our drawing room, Queen Mary told Wellington firmly, "Not until I finish my cigarette." (Koo, 1975, p. 240)

Despite the high life, Madame Koo was deep-down a true blue Nyonya who loved her durians, and on visits to Singapore in the 1920s, she 'scoured the city for these evil-smelling fruits.' (Koo, 1943, p. 192)

However, surely even Madame Wellington Koo, who famously had a bruise on her chest as a child from the 80-carat diamond her mother suspended round her neck, must pale in comparison to our own beloved former head of state, the late Baba Wee Kim Wee, who entertained Queen Elizabeth at the Istana during her state visit in October 1989. Finally of course we must be most proud of the eldest son of the late Nyonya Chua Jim Neo. The Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew was conferred the title of Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael & St George in February 1972 when he was Prime Minister during the Queen's first visit to Singapore. Interestingly, as loyal to the royals as the Baba were, they were also the first to push for independence in Singapore and Malaysia.

The days of Eurocentric, 'regiphiliac' encyclopaedias may be gone, but there is now a new and vast source of royal trivia — the internet. I had an epiphany when I discovered with enormous satisfaction from Wikipedia that although the Queen only made three state visits to Singapore, she made no less than six fuel stops en route to other destinations. ❖

References

- Madame Wellington Koo, *Hui-lan Koo*, Dial Press, New York, 1943.
 Madame Wellington Koo, *No Feast Lasts Forever*, Quadrangle, New York, 1975.
 Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, John Murray, London, 1923.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Commonwealth_visits_made_by_Queen_Elizabeth_II



Mr & Mrs Wellington Koo with Queen Mary and her lady-in-waiting at the Chinese Embassy in London, 1944. Their son Freeman stands at the back (Koo, 1975, facing p. 186).

SPIRIT MEDIUMS & THE BABA COMMUNITY

A child of the 1930s when faith in spirit mediums was strong, **William Gwee Thian Hock** shares his insights on a practice much-patronised by the Baba community.
(The first of a two-part series.)

The spirit medium practice is a worldwide phenomenon. It is practised variously and sometimes surreptitiously, in diverse locations ranging from the backwoods of the Third World to the modern cities of First World countries. Though there are numerous variations, its general *modus operandi* involves a person of either sex, usually termed the medium, summoning and invoking the aid of a particular spirit or entity for advice or healing on behalf of a client. The entity communicates with the client either by speaking directly through the medium's physical body while the latter is in a trance state or by whispering into the ears of the medium who remains fully lucid and relays the message to the client. The session is typically termed a *séance*, at the end of which the entity takes its leave but remains at the beck and call of the medium's future summons. Mediums are also known as mystics, sitters, sorcerers, shamans, witch doctors, psychics, medicine men and so on depending on the milieu.



The Singapore Baba community used to rely heavily on spirit mediums to help solve their personal and family problems and bodily ills. Resorting to western-trained medical practitioners for their bodily ailments was not common then. As a result of this dependence on spirit mediums, the practice proliferated. There are puzzling paranormal enigmas involved that science has yet to satisfactorily explain.

Previously, Babas believed in the co-existence of two worlds: one, the visible world populated by humans and other life forms, both of which exist in physical form, and two, an invisible realm, whose denizens – spirits – exist in ethereal form. An invisible barrier separates these two worlds. But, by several means yet to be fully understood, this barrier can be breached to enable the two sides to establish contact, and those from the invisible world may interact with our world.

It was further accepted that both good and evil spirits inhabited the other world with the power to initiate benevolent and malevolent deeds respectively. The Babas additionally believed that a ranking system exists in the

other world. Thus, some of the spirits summoned by the earthly mediums would possess more power than others because of their higher rank which had been conferred upon them by the authority of the ethereal realm. Regardless of their rank, the Babas called good spirits *Datok* (deity). Bad spirits were termed *Barang Jahat* (bad entities) or *Barang Kotor* (dirty/evil entities). While good spirits were reputed to only do good, bad spirits were capable of doing both good and evil!

There were several avenues open for those aspiring to be a medium. When a person was unknowingly endowed with a dormant *hud kut* (possessing divine/spiritual quality), it was a simple matter of activating that in order to achieve mediumhood. About 50 years ago, there was a Taoist temple situated not far from the Everitt Road junction along Koon Seng Road. There, on certain days, a group of about half-a-dozen young boys could be seen seated on a mat in front of the altar table. Their hands would be clasped in prayer and their eyes closed. A man, standing by the altar's side, would chant a holy text in an attempt to induce any boy possessing the gift of the *hud kut* to fall into a

trance and thereby be identified as medium material. As a mere onlooker, I never discovered this experiment's rate of success.

A person could also discover his hidden *hud kut* gift accidentally. My father's friend discovered his medium potential when he attended a Taoist temple celebration. The temple's medium was in a trance amidst clashing cymbals, drums and gongs. Without warning, the said friend suddenly fell into a trance. Later, he was informed that one of the temple's deities had taken possession of his body. Apparently, he had even climbed a ladder of knives barefoot alongside the temple medium! On another occasion, he happened to be passing a Hindu temple in a neighbouring country during a fire-walking ceremony and suddenly took off his shoes, ran into the temple and proceeded to walk the length of the fiery pit as though it was the most natural thing to do. Thus realising that he possessed the *hud kut* and was predisposed to spiritual trances, he became wary and took pains to avoid being in the vicinity of temple celebrations be they of Chinese or Hindu origins as he had no inclination to be a spirit medium.

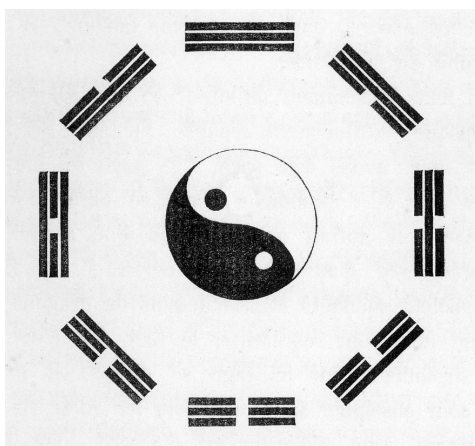
The Keppel Medium

Apart from natural-born *hud kut*, some acquired the ability to be a medium through learning the art from a spiritual leader, usually overseas. In many instances, the spirits that subsequently made contact with this type of medium were evil. One infamous example was of a Baba medium who practised in a lane off Keppel Harbour. He was much feared and self-styled himself a professor. In his home he had several fearsome-looking idols who were so large that they almost touched the ceiling. At his altar were many small effigies of deities not commonly known to the Baba community. When a client came for consultation, he would choose an appropriate large idol for help. Without going into a trance, he would chant before this idol while standing on one leg with both eyes closed. By means known only to himself, he was able to receive messages which he subsequently passed on to the client. He was reputed to charge an exorbitant fee. Families of good standing shunned and avoided patronizing him unless in sheer desperation or out of plain naivety. It was widely rumoured that he had obtained his skill from a teacher in a neighbouring country to where he had fled as a fugitive years ago before sneaking back to Singapore.

In the garden of his home were a number of poles almost the height of full grown coconut trees. At the top of each pole was a platform serving as a small tabletop upon which he placed offerings of food nightly. The eerie sounds made by spirits coming for the food in the wee hours of the night were both a source of fear and insomnia

for his neighbours. He would also stare at the sun for long periods without apparent harm to his eyes. Many victims of charm and hex who sought his help for a cure were probably turning to the very source that had been paid to cast the evil spell in the first place. Indeed, he was the classic *geraji dua mata*: one who benefits from both sides!

In my younger days, I would gaze in awe at a series of photographs hung on a wall outside a photography studio at the junction of Hill Street and North Bridge Road. These were photographs of the Keppel Harbour medium in various poses with his bare torso and limbs skewered and hooked without any sign of blood or pain. My father said that this medium liked to exhibit his prowess and the photos were of a show he gave at an amusement park.



Unexpected Mediums

There were also individuals who became mediums unexpectedly. Many years ago, an adolescent nyonya girl in Alor Gajah suddenly ran out of her home into the forest nearby. After several days of searching, her family found her deep in the forest in a trance, seated cross-legged upon a large boulder. When she came round at home, she was unable to recollect anything that had happened. She

continued to cause distress by repeatedly falling into a trance without warning. Finally, a neighbour, well-versed in the supernatural, explained that a particular *Datok* from the other world desired to come to help humans in trouble and had picked this young lady as a medium. The neighbour taught the family how to summon and send this deity off as and when necessary. Later, the nyonya migrated to Singapore but continued her role as a medium throughout her life.

A similar case occurred during World War II at the height of the Japanese assault on Singapore from December 1941 through February 1942. A nyonya was suddenly taken ill and went into a trance. A female spirit had taken possession of her body and revealed that she had returned to help Singaporeans. Speaking in Baba Malay, the spirit said that until her death not long ago, she had resided in Onan Road in Joo Chiat. She said she had been conferred a measure of spiritual power by the authority in the other world and assigned to help mankind. The nyonya who was in the trance had been chosen to serve as her medium for her mission. As proof of her previous existence, she named her living siblings and relatives. Indeed, all the *Datok*'s claims were found to be completely true. I have personally witnessed the *Datok*'s family chatting with her over their family affairs through the medium. Baba families placed their faith and trust upon a particular *Datok* based on how *sia* (spiritually effective) the *Datok* had proven to

be. By this measure, this *Datok* was the most remarkable and outshone all the rest.

A stone's throw from the back gate of my previous home was a temple very popular with babas and nyonyas around 60 years ago. The temple keeper was a gentleman who spoke the Baba patois fluently. This temple housed a deity represented by a clothed object constructed of either bamboo or rattan in the shape of a tortoise without its head and limbs; hence the derived name of *Datok Bakol* (basket deity). To summon this *Datok*, the keeper prayed with joss sticks and positioned the basket effigy on a mat in front of the altar. The keeper, sitting on the mat, would hold on to one side of the effigy while his assistant would hold the other side. The devotee who had come to consult the deity would also sit on the mat close to the keeper. When the deity had arrived, the effigy would move. The devotee then voiced reasons for wanting the deity's help. The effigy would swing close to the medium's ear after which the medium would convey advice or instructions to the client. Throughout the session, this temple keeper/medium was not in a trance but was able to hear the deity.

Japanese Mediums

There were yet other types of mediums. Before the Baba community underwent mass conversion to Christianity, many Baba homes housed a household deity. And, in some instances, a member of the family could confer with the deity for help when there was an emergency. This was a secret known only to the people in that home. Until 10 years ago, my father had a lady cousin residing in a senior citizens' home and I used to pay her regular visits. Once, she revealed to me that her late brother, who was close to my father, had been a medium in contact with a Japanese deity. She claimed that after Singapore had fallen to the Japanese armed forces, and Chinese Singaporeans were herded into internment centres during the notorious 'sook ching', her family was spared the need to leave their home. When the Japanese soldiers pushed their way into their home to drive them out, they stopped short when they saw the Japanese deity's effigy on the household altar. The soldiers then issued a special permit for the family to be exempted from the drive. That no one else knew about this was understandable. That family simply did not want to lose their privacy. It would have been difficult to turn relatives down if they kept visiting to seek spiritual help.

The presence of a Japanese deity in Singapore came as a surprise to me but this was not impossible. When I was very young there was a well-known Japanese masseur and bonesetter whose practice was along Dhoby Ghaut. He was reputed to be under contract to the Singapore football authority and was always at the stadium on standby for bone injuries whenever there was an important match. According to my mother, I had a very bad ankle sprain once. She rushed me to the Japanese who applied

a black ointment on the swelling which subsided the next morning. A friend informed me that this Japanese masseur was also a medium. I was not able to confirm this, but we can conclude that spirit medium practice was indeed rife in Singapore at that time.

Another category of medium remains mysterious to me. In the early 1900s, adolescent nyonyas loved to indulge in a playful séance as a pastime. They would nominate one amongst their number to be their medium. The nominated medium had to satisfy two conditions: she must be a virgin and not menstruating on that day! In fact, these criteria applied to the other participants as well. They would begin by singing a chorus repeatedly until a low-ranking deity arrived to take possession of the nominated medium's body. During the séance the participants would ask personal questions of their future, their fortune and so on. When they wanted to end the session they had to sing another chorus repeatedly until the deity took leave. Failure to sing the farewell chorus correctly could result in dire consequences because the deity would refuse to leave. I cannot fathom how the young, nominated medium was able to fall into a trance when she might not have possessed the *hud kut*.

Pak Poe and Chiam Si

Even though the Baba community believed in spirit mediums, it did not necessarily follow that they turned to them at the first appearance of a domestic problem or of ill health. First, they would evaluate the severity of the problem before the decision of where and who to turn to was made. If it was a simple matter of obtaining an assurance that it was auspicious to embark on an impending journey, then the neighbourhood Taoist temple was the choice to seek the answer. The person intending to travel or a representative from the household (nearly always a nyonya) then headed straight to the temple to burn joss sticks before the main deity revealing the plan for the intended journey. If a "yes" or "no" answer was desired, the wooden divining block, the *pak poe*, was used. When a more detailed reply was required, the *chiam si* (divining sticks) would be deployed. This second method returned a slip of paper with printed Chinese characters bearing the answer to the query. Being Chinese-illiterate, the nyonya had to turn to the temple staff for assistance to read and decipher the message on the paper. Materials for both the *pak poe* and *chiam si* were readily available on the altar table for public use.

It was a source of quiet amusement for me on many occasions when I encountered someone on such a mission at a temple. Often, the devotee would pray aloud within earshot of other devotees. Not only was I privy to many family and personal problems, but the look of profound piety and faith on their faces contrasted with their often colourful language is most memorable. ❖

Part two in the next issue: Baba and Nyonya Mediums.

PERANAKAN TRIVIA GLEANED FROM BABA LITERARY WORKS

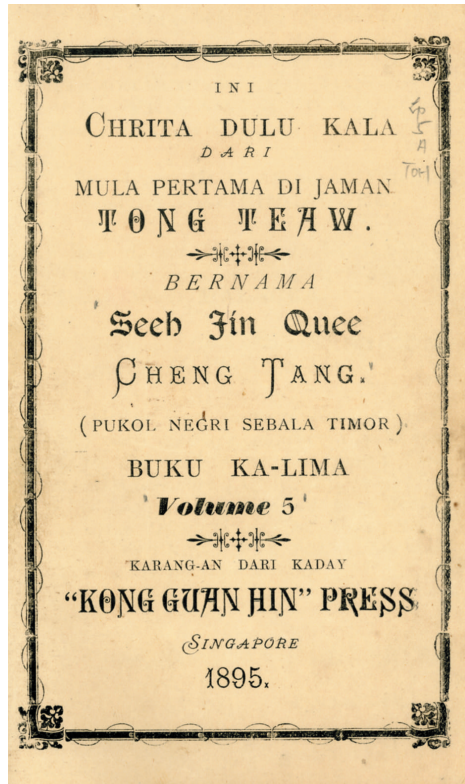
In the previous issue, Tan Kuning looked at the impact of romanised English on the development of Peranakan literature. Here, **Baba Ee Sin Soo** culls nuggets of literary trivia from a study by S K Yoong and A N Zainab*.

The Babas were actively involved in publishing newspapers, magazines and books for a readership that was mainly confined to the Straits Chinese community. The first romanised newspapers, the Straits Chinese Herald (*Surat Khabar Peranakan*) and *Bintang Timor*, were published in 1894. Other newspapers included *Kabar Slalu* (Daily News) in 1924 and *Kabar Uchapan Baru* (Eastern Weekly Review) in 1926.

Several translated Chinese stories were serialised. The *Bintang Timor* published the *Hikayat Percintaan Si Putih* (Love story of Si Puteh) series. The first romanised Malay weekly magazine, *Bintang Peranakan* (1930), featured stories which were later compiled in volumes, for example, *Ow Liat Kok Chee*, as translated by Seng & San. Another weekly, *Sri Peranakan* (1932), covered Yeo Boon Kong Cheng Lam Ban, also translated by Seng & San, later published in four volumes.

Did you know ...

- 68 identified titles of Baba translated works** were published between 1889 and 1950. However, many titles from private collections were likely to have been missed out.
- The titles are held in private collections or in the libraries of:**
 - University of Malaya,
 - Science University Malaysia,
 - National University of Malaysia,
 - Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka,
 - National University of Singapore,
 - National Library of Singapore and
 - the British Library.
- There were three periods of active publication of Baba translated works.** The 1930s were most active,



Cover of Seeh Jin Quee Cheng Teng. (1895)

publishing over 50 percent of translated works (39 out of 68 titles). 18 works were translated between 1889 - 1909, followed by 10 between 1910 and 1929. Another 39 titles were published between 1930 and 1939 and one was identified in 1950.

- Baba works were mainly translations** of classical historical stories of chivalry, romance, folklore and legends. Historical works were the most common. Out of 68 titles, only 10 were romances, nine folklore and seven legends. Though narrated in Baba Malay, sentences had a motley mix of English expressions, Chinese characters and transliterations.

48 out of the 68 titles were serialised. The longest running serial was *Cheong Moh In* (1938), consisting of 55 volumes and 1,759

pages. The *Sam Kok* (1892-1896) had 30 volumes with 4,622 pages. Only a few publishers provided the contents page. Books were often unpagged.

- The titles were priced between 10 cents and 2 dollars in Straits currency**, a phenomenal sum few could afford in those days. So the buyers were mostly from the upper middle class. Subscriptions were only within Singapore and the majority of readers were urbanites from Singapore, Malacca and Penang.
- A romanised typesetter was used in the printing process. **60 titles began with the phrase "Chrita dulu-kala bernama ..."** (This is an ancient story entitled ...) similar to how a Chinese storyteller told a story. Most covers of published works were colourfully illustrated to attract readers. These were drawn in the style of woodcuts, the traditional form used in Chinese xylographic printing. The small sizes, between 19cm x 14cm and 16cm x 10cm, made it easy to pass around to read. Some bore informative prefaces. In *Lek Boh Tan*, "Ini satu chrita dulu-kala nama-nya Lek Boh Tan... blom perna lagi siapa siap kluarkan.. chritanya betol extra special A chuma di-dalam 10 buku saja, complete set-nya" (This is a story entitled *Lek Boh Tan* ... never published before, an extra special A story – the complete set is only in 10 volumes).
- 103 people- translators, illustrators, editors, Chinese and romanised Malay readers and helpers – were involved in the 68 translated works.** Some handled more than one title



Illustrations by Tan Phiak Kong in Seeh Jin Quee Cheng Tang (1895).

and in multiple roles. Translators were cited in most titles since they were key to the works. Chinese readers were also mentioned as they understood and read the story to the translator or helper. Romanised Malay readers were bilingual but usually illiterate in Chinese script; they interpreted the stories into Baba Malay for the translators. The translator, in turn, being usually illiterate in written Chinese, was assisted by the Chinese reader. Often, the translator was also the editor, illustrator and publisher. A helper could assist the translator or be the reader for the chief translator.

In most translated works, the editors coordinated the work of the translators and illustrators, editing the stories in terms of sentence structure and spelling. Illustrators were seldom mentioned.

The most prominent translator was Chan Kim Boon, also known as *Batu Gantong*, born in *Batu Gantong*, Penang in 1851. He translated three popular Chinese classics: *Sam Kok* (Romance of the Three Kingdoms, 30 volumes, 1892-1896); *Song Kang* (Water Margin, 19 volumes, 1899-1902) and *Kou Chey Thian* (Journey to the West, 9 volumes, 1911-1913). He was an illustrator who used the preface to introduce himself and persons involved in *Kou Chey Thian* (1911-1912).

The most prolific translator was Wan Boon Seng, also known as *Panah Pranakan*. He alone translated 21 titles between 1930 and 1939 and *Botan Kiongchoo*, the last translation work that could be traced in 1950. He was an editor of 11 publications, a publisher and poet. He was often assisted by Lee Seng Poh,

N M Seng, Seow Chin San, Tan Chin Thuan and Tan Yew Aik.

The earliest translator was Tan Beng Teck who translated *Heng Guan Seo Chia* (1889), *Hong Keow* (1889), *Kim Ko Kee Quan* (The Special Phenomena of Past and Present) (1889) and *Lwee Hong Thak* (A legend about a black and white snake, 1889).

Penangite Tan Kheam Hock, a prominent personality in the Straits Settlement, helped Chan Kim Boon in *Gnoh Bee Yean* (Five Beauties) (1891) and *Hong Keow* (1892, volumes 1, 6-8).

The most outstanding illustrator was Tan Phiak Kong, especially for works published between 1889 and 1909. He illustrated *Chin See Bee* (1899), *Chin Suat Bee* (1899), *Gnoh Bee Yean* (Five Beauties) (1891-1982), *Seeh Jin Quee Cheng Tang* (1895) and *Ban Wha Law* (Tek Cheng, a general in the Song Dynasty 1910).

8. All the 31 publishers and 21 printing presses were located in Singapore. Most of the Baba publishing activity was around the Cross Street area.

The most active publishers were Wan Boon Seng, Kim Seck Chye Press and Nanyang Romanised Malay Book Co.

21 printing presses were named in 62 of the Baba translated works. The most prolific were Khai Sing Press, Tak Seng Press, Kim Seck Chye Press and Nai Beng & Co, printing five or more translated works each. ❖

* The study by S.K. Yoong and A N Zainab was published in the *Journal of Educational Media & Library Sciences*, 42:2, December 2004, p.179-198 (website:joemls.tku.edu.tw/42/42-2/179-198.pdf)

COLLECTING WITH MRS MARIETTE

Colin Chee explores with Mrs Betty Mariette some of the challenges of collecting Peranakan antiques.

On 7 August 2008, Mrs Betty Mariette gave an absorbing account of her personal journey in collecting Peranakan treasures. Not surprisingly, the number of people attending her talk at the Peranakan Museum on Armenian Street was overwhelming. The venue had to be moved to the museum's larger lobby hall to accommodate the large crowd. Mrs Mariette, a member of The Peranakan Association since the early 1980s, bought her first silver belt from an antique shop in KL in 1967 with her first pay packet! It was not a nyonya belt but one worn by Kadazan women of Sarawak. But after this sentimental purchase she became a dedicated Peranakan silver collector and there was no stopping her. Often, she would hunt for her treasures incognito. Even as she tries to still keep a low profile, Mrs Mariette cannot escape the recognition for being the owner of the Kapitan China Yap Ah Loy dinner ware now splendidly on display at the Peranakan Museum.



Q1. I found it amusing how you chose not to use your married name when visiting dealers because being *ang moh* would automatically increase the prices of those pieces you were interested in. Aside from this, what are the challenges that collectors face nowadays?

In the 60s, 70s and early 80s there was an abundance of cultural material available in the shops and homes of old Peranakan families. But as urbanisation took its toll on things perceived as outdated and old, there was a dearth of genuine beautiful Peranakan artefacts. Families have become more aware of their material culture and prefer to hoard them as heirlooms or to only part with them at astronomical prices, sometimes even beyond the perceived market value. Our *bibiks* have gotten smart to the street value of these items. In addition, heirlooms have gotten more and more fragmented as extended families break up into smaller nuclear families. But the biggest challenge facing collectors these days, especially our young and earnest collectors, is the abundance of fake artefacts that are being passed on as rare finds - jewellery and silver, porcelain and even furniture! I really feel for them, because they part with hard-earned money for fakes and it kills their interest. That's why I and other genuine collectors are so against fakes!



**Turquoise
Ground Wine
Warmer and Cup**
China
Republican
mark and period
(1912-1949)
Porcelain



**Silver-gilt
Wedding
Tea Set**
Malacca
Late 19th -
early 20th
century

Q2. What are the ways collectors can get around these challenges? Are there any?

As a first generation collector I had the advantage of availability and low cost. But I was thrown into the deep end. I really had no direction, no guidance. Everything was learnt by instinct, by talking to dealers and owners, and by trial and error. You know, when I first started it was because I bought silver purses, belts etcetera for personal adornment! Our young collectors these days have the advantage of readily available expert knowledge in books, museums, old collectors who have become experts in their own right, and experienced dealers. They should take advantage of this. Learn, compare and discuss before taking the plunge. But most of all, they must want to buy an item because they love it and can live with it because collecting has become a very expensive hobby. They cannot afford to behave with the detachment of traders and investors. This is because the market for Peranakan artefacts is small and there are other more viable alternative investment avenues like other art forms and equities.

Q3. Is there a growing interest in Peranakan antiques? Is it something that's limited to just parts of South-east Asia? I mean, after all these years, Peranakan antiques, no matter how beautiful, do not feature in international or even regional auctions.

There has been a resurgence of interest in things Peranakan. Along with it inevitably has been the growth of interest in Peranakan antiques be they jewellery and silver, embroidery and beadwork, sarong kebayas, porcelain and furniture. But I think the interest is at best regional with Singapore and Malaysia as the region's main centres, although I also see the interest in Indonesia, Thailand and even Myanmar. There is also nascent interest in Australia. While there is interest in Peranakan culture elsewhere in the world - for its depth and beauty - it will be more out of curiosity.

Q4. If you were to be a collector, starting fresh today, what would you do? Especially given the dearth of material in the shops. You mentioned in your talk the need for focus, judgment and discipline. Where and how would you start collecting?

I would study, study, compare and be focussed. I would be selective and careful about what I buy. There is so much to learn about our culture from each artefact - which adds depth to our understanding of what being a Peranakan



means. That's why I collect out of love for the culture and for what each item means to me. Our young collectors may want to bear this in mind because, as I have mentioned earlier, it has become a very expensive hobby.

Q5. In 2006 the National Heritage Board honoured you and Roger with its award - the Patron of Heritage, Distinguished Supporter of Heritage Award. What have you got to say about this?

As a collector of 40 years it represents a fulfilment of sorts for me. But more importantly, together with the government's support of our new Peranakan Museum, not to mention our just-opened Baba House on Neil Road, it is an endorsement of our culture and heritage. It is something we as a community should be proud about because our heritage is worth preserving and hopefully will grow in strength as our young continue to take an interest in our culture. The fact is, our culture is the only one that has evolved as something separate and unique from our original Chinese and Malay cultures. You won't find living Peranakan communities anywhere else in the world.

Q6. Please share with us what would be your one personal favourite thing in your current collection, if you were forced to choose only one?

This is like asking me to choose among my children! I can't choose because each piece has a beautiful memory for me. It's such an unfair question to ask, Colin! ❖

All photographs courtesy of Peranakan Museum.

MORE EAST MEETS WEST

Due to popular demand, we feature more Western influenced recipes.

Noreen Chan serves tea-time treats.

Many Peranakan families adopted the English practice of afternoon tea, but as so often happens, they adapted it according to local norms. So rather than cucumber or ham sandwiches for example, they might serve chilli sardine as an alternative filling. Even cakes might be given a local flavour such as pandan or banana.

My grandmother enjoyed baking so much that her father had a special side-kitchen built with modern gas ovens, so that she and her sisters would not need to use the main kitchen where the *chongpohs* or male cooks worked. My great-grandfather also bought recipe books, like the one produced by Swans Down, an American company founded in 1856 by the Igleheart brothers. My copy of their slim booklet "Cake Secrets" states "The completely successful cake, whether sponge or butter cake, is a culinary triumph.... Perfect cake is light, tender and agreeably moist." It goes on to describe how you can make the perfect cake. The recipes, with their beguiling colour illustrations, almost convince you that if you only tried, you would indeed succeed.

My *kong cho's* amateur classical music orchestra used to practise at the family home, Rosedale, every Thursday evening after work. It was my Mama's task, as a teenager, to prepare the snacks for the orchestra members. On Wednesday she would bake "Western" cakes, and on the Thursday, she would prepare the traditional local kueh (that did not keep as well). She must have been a skilled cook, because on several occasions the musicians told her, "Elsie, we don't come here for the practice, we come for your cakes!"

Even after she married and moved to Malacca, her

baking skills were not wasted as she was kept busy throughout the Lunar New Year period and other festive occasions. Whenever friends and relatives sent gifts like oranges, Mama's in-laws were obliged to *balas balek* (return in kind) and frequently, a freshly baked cake would be placed in the *bakul siah* for return to the giver. It was not unusual for her to bake 20 cakes or more! I have never tried Mama's Daffodil Cake which, by her own account, was her most popular cake. But I have the recipe, so maybe one day I shall.

GREEN CHILLIES AND PRAWNS - SANDWICH FILLING

(Recipe from Mrs Hock San)

Peranakans, being accustomed to spicy food, preferred more robust flavours in their sandwiches. This recipe is one such example. The filling can also be delicious with fresh lettuce as a wrap.

1/2 kati (300g) prawns, cleaned and shelled, lightly steamed and minced. Reserve the stock.

Grind or pound finely the *rempah*:

1 stalk *serai* (lemongrass)

2 thin slices *lengkuas* (galangal) – optional

2-3 *buah keras* (candlenuts)

6 green chillies seeded and chopped fine

8 (about 1/2 cup) small onions

1 marble-sized *belachan* (optional)

1/2 teacup thick coconut milk

2 dessertspoons oil

2 *daon lemo purot* (kaffir lime leaves)

Heat oil in pan and fry the *rempah* until well cooked. Add prawns, stir, add the prawn stock, lime leaves, coconut milk and salt to taste. Cook until almost dry but still moist.



Green chillies and prawns - sandwich filling.



Buns.



Sugee Cake.



"Grandma P P" (Pasir Panjang) was Noreen's grandmother's maternal grandmother who, when she used to live in the Neil Road area, was known as "Mak Spylan" (Spylan being a corruption of "Sepoy Lines", the area in Outram where the Singapore General Hospital now stands). She later moved to Pasir Panjang where her son-in-law (Noreen's great-grandfather), Chia Keng Tye, had his holiday home at the 7½ mile stone of Pasir Panjang Road.

BUNS (Recipe from Grandma P P)

An interesting bread recipe that uses toddy instead of yeast as a rising agent. *Tapay* liquor (the "juice" that is formed in the making of *tapay pulot*) can be used instead.

1 kati (600g) flour
6 oz (170g) sugar
3 eggs
¾ cup toddy
7 tablespoons butter
Raisins

Beat eggs with sugar until thick. Put flour in a tray, add egg mixture and toddy alternately until it binds into a soft dough. Add butter a little at a time and knead well. If it is stiff add more toddy until of right consistency

and knead again. Leave it to rise in a bowl until almost double its size. Prepare this at about 4 – 5 pm. Before bedtime (9 – 10 pm) knead the dough with a little butter. Add raisins, divide equally, arrange on buttered tin and

leave to rise until early next morning. Bake in oven 350°F (170°C). When brown, brush with butter.

SUGEE CAKE (Recipe from Mrs Irene Wong)

Sugee, or semolina, is widely used in cooking both savoury dishes, like the South Indian *rava dosa* and *uppama*, and sweet treats like the Levantine *halva* (or *helva*, *halouva* or *halwa*, depending on which country you are in). There are as so many recipes for sugree cake. No definitive version, but most will agree that butter (lots of it!), sugar, eggs and almonds are essential.

I think the Eurasians make the best sugree cake, but that's just my opinion. They are a fixture at important occasions like Easter, Christmas and at weddings, when they are topped with icing.

This is a recipe for a 3 lb (1.4kg) cake:

1 lb butter
½ kati sugree
½ kati sugar
2 tahils flour
½ lb almonds
13 egg yolks, 4 egg whites
1 tablespoons brandy
1 tablespoon vanilla

Beat butter and sugar to a cream until white and fluffy, add sugree and soak for one hour. After an hour beat the yolks thoroughly, then mix together with the sugree and butter. Add the flour and almonds. Then add the brandy and vanilla. Beat the egg whites to a stiff froth and add to the mixture. Bake in a moderate oven for an hour without opening the oven.

Christopher Lim shares three favourite dishes in Penang-Peranakan agak-agak style.

OLD-FASHIONED CHICKEN CHOP

This recipe is regarded as Hainanese rather than Peranakan but it remains a firm favourite of babas and nyonyas of old. My great-grandmother used to call for the trishaw to buy this dish so that great-grandfather could enjoy it at home with his rice.

It's traditionally enhanced with a mixture of English mustard and *ang moh tauyu* sauce, served with gravy and toasted Bengali *roti*.

Ingredients:

Chicken thigh fillet (preferably boned and lightly flattened)
Plain flour
Eggs (beaten)
Cooking oil
Bengali *roti* (sliced, toasted, buttered and quartered)

Gravy:

Onions (slice thinly in rings)
Fresh green peas
Diced carrots
Tomato (quartered)
Chicken stock
Corn starch (dissolved with a little water)
Sugar and salt (to taste)

Roll the chicken in flour and then the beaten egg. Fry in hot oil in a wok until crispy, golden brown. Place on a serving dish.

To prepare the gravy, fry the onions lightly in a little oil in a wok. Add the diced carrots and continue to sauté. When slightly soft, add the green peas and tomatoes. Simmer for a while on low fire and add some stock if too dry. Add cornstarch to thicken, and salt and sugar to taste.

Pour the gravy over the chicken and serve immediately with hot *roti*, Worcestershire sauce, tomato sauce, chilli sauce and English mustard. Spice up with a dash of pepper.

BAK WAN (MEAT BALL) STEW

Available in coffee shops selling "economy rice".

Ingredients for meat balls:

Ground pork (preferably fatty pork or *sam chan bak*)
Onions (chopped finely)
Water chestnuts (diced into very small cubes)
Prawns (diced)
Salt and sugar to taste
Corn flour (dissolved in a little water)
Egg (one)
Coriander leaves (shredded finely for garnishing)
Cooking oil



Old-fashioned chicken chop.



Bak Wan (Meat Ball)Stew.

Ingredients for gravy:

Onions (sliced thinly into rings)
Carrots (sliced slanted)
Potatoes (in wedges and deep fried till golden brown)
Green peas
Tomatoes (quartered)
Corn starch (dissolved in a little water)
Cinnamon stick (optional)
Sugar and salt to taste
Pepper
Cooking oil

Preparing the meat balls:

Mix all the meat ball ingredients well. Form into balls. Deep fry till golden brown. Drain and set aside on a serving dish. Keep warm.



Preparing the gravy:

Add a few tablespoons of cooking oil to a hot wok. Sauté the onion rings lightly. Add the diced carrots, potato wedges and cinnamon stick. Simmer on low fire then add the peas and tomato quarters. Thicken with the corn starch. Add salt and sugar to taste.

When ready, pour the hot gravy on the meatballs, add a dash of pepper and serve immediately with rice. Remember to remove the cinnamon stick.

*The meatballs should not be too soft. The gravy should be of pouring consistency, not diluted, and the fragrance of cinnamon not too overpowering.

ROTI BABI

Ingredients:

A loaf of white bread (edges trimmed off, sliced 1 inch thick and slit across the middle to create a pouch)

Beaten egg
Cooking oil
Ground pork
Shallots and garlic (peeled and diced)
Five spice powder
Diced carrots
French beans (sliced slanting and thinly)
Crab meat
Salt and sugar (to taste)
One boiled potato (mashed)

Ingredients for Ang Moh Tauyu Sauce:

Worcestershire sauce
Chillies (sliced slanting)
Shallots (sliced thinly)
Tomato sauce
Chilli sauce
Sugar to taste

Preparing the filling:

Sauté the onions and garlic in hot oil in a pan. When golden brown, add the ground pork and carrots. Stir until fragrant. When partly cooked, add the French beans and continue to stir.

Add salt, sugar and five-spice powder. Finally, add the crab meat. Do not stir too much to prevent the crab meat from disintegrating. If the filling is watery, add the mashed boiled potato to absorb and thicken it, to make it easier to insert into the bread pouches. Dish into a bowl and leave it to cool.

Slit pouches in the bread and use a tablespoon to fill with the mixture. Do not overstuff because the filling may spill out when coated in the beaten egg. Lower gently into a wok of hot oil and fry till golden brown.

Place onto a steel colander to drain the excess oil. Arrange nicely on a serving plate and serve immediately with *ang moh tauyu* sauce.



Roti Babi.

Preparing the Ang Moh Tauyu sauce:

Pour Worcester sauce into a mixing bowl and stir in cut chillies and sliced shallots.

Add tomato and chilli sauces and sugar to taste. Pour into a small dish and serve with the *roti babi*. ❖

Rumah Kim Choo
The peranakan style

Looking for nonya kebayas?

Visit us today at:

109A East Coast Road, Singapore 428800

Opening Hours

Mondays to Saturdays 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Sundays 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Contact:

Tel: +65 6741 2125

Email: raymond@kimchoo.com

A BABA IN MELBOURNE

By Colin Chee

"Want to come over to my place for lunch on Saturday?" was the generous invite we got from Baba David Neo over the mobile.

We accepted without hesitation. We had been told by Melbournians in the know that this young man could turn out a mean Peranakan meal to die for.

"I inherited my culinary skills from my Mama," said David, after we had settled ourselves quite comfortably into his 900-sq ft studio apartment in northern Melbourne. "I learnt to cook out of necessity as mom died when I was a teenager and I had to look after an invalid father," he said.

David has been living in a small turmeric-coloured two-storey apartment block in Thornbury for the last seven years. It is close to Trinity College where he lectures. The old single-storey Federation wooden houses sharing the street look a little worn from lack of care but are charming. It was all very Aussie outside. There was not a hint of what was to be until we entered his apartment.

We were floored the minute we stepped in!

The familiar fragrance of diced shallots being lightly gilded in a pan on a stove tucked into a little corner permeated the room.

A soft light from a large window overlooking a garden of mature trees and greenery cast a warm glow over the whole room. The light insinuated itself nostalgically onto David's eclectic collection of an antique upright piano, Peranakan chairs, cupboards, tables and paraphernalia.



Books and research notes were piled high in various corners.

"We come from a long line of Peranakans," David said, recalling matter-of-factly his family tree. "My great grandfather was Neo Ong Hee, one of Tan Tock Seng's grandsons."

David left Singapore at 20 after completing national service. He studied communications in Calgary, Canada, got his masters from Montreal, and is working on his PhD in Melbourne, Australia, where he has decided to settle.

While we were admiring his home decor and knick-knacks, David conjured up his last two dishes of *ayam bakar* and *chili sotong*.

"We don't lack anything here," said David. "All the spices and sauces we need for a typical Peranakan meal are easily available. I was so thrilled to find *daun pandan* in Melbourne

when I first came—*boleh bikin kueh sarlat!* The Vietnamese have brought into Australia all the stuff that we need and even grow them here. I can get everything I need at Preston market which is 5 minutes away."

For lunch, four of us - David, my wife Linda, her uncle Patrick Low (who emigrated to Melbourne back in the late 1970s), and I - feasted on *nasi kuning*, *achar*, *ayam bakar*, *chili sotong*, *kerabu telur* and *tempe goreng*.

It was just short of a miracle that a bare-bones kitchen could be instrumental in producing authentic, full-hearted Peranakan *look* in all its breadth of flavours and aromas.

Sedap sekali, David. Kamsiah! ❖



TANG CHEK

By Tan Kuning

Tang Chek (Winter Solstice) falls annually on 22 December in the 11th month of the Chinese calendar. Tang Chek literally means Winter (*Tang*) has arrived (*Chek*). It is a day of celebration signifying that the whole family has survived the year after the winter. If there is death in the family that year, *kueh ee* (glutinous rice dumplings) cannot be served. To symbolise family unity, *kueh ee* in syrup is made only on Tang Chek for both consumption and as a thanksgiving offering to the Kitchen God and the ancestral spirits who are believed to be the protectors of family safety.

Early on Tang Chek morning, offerings comprising several bowls of *kueh ee* in syrup are offered to the Kitchen God and spirits of the ancestors respectively. If there is a well within the compound, a bowl of *kueh ee* must also be offered to the spirit of the well. Two pieces of *kueh ee*, one red and the other white, must be stuck behind the main door of the house as an offering to the spirit of the door. These two pieces of *kueh ee* are left to dry out and remain stuck behind the door for months to bless the family for the coming year.

Tang Chek also marks the start of a gradual build up to Chinese New Year. Children are reminded of its approach by their elders. A grandmother might say to them, "Today is Tang Chek and every child has grown one year older. Be on your best behaviour and don't cry over trivial matters." (*"Hari ini Tang Chek. Dari hari ini budak budak semua sudah besar satu taon. Jaga perangai baik baik. Tak boleh sikit sikit buat menangis!"*)

After laying out the *kueh ee* offerings, all the bowls are collected and the *kueh ee* returned to the pot for a second boiling. This time, they are distributed for human consumption. To give it a Peranakan twist, coconut milk is added to make it *lemak*.

Peranakan *kueh ee* is made of glutinous rice flour (*pulot*) without any filling. Commercially available versions are bigger and may contain fillings of red bean or lotus paste. In the days when glutinous flour was not available in the market, almost every Peranakan home had a *batu boh* (a heavy grinder made of granite) to grind wet glutinous rice manually. The ground flour was put into a sack and the water pressed out by placing a heavy granite grinder, *tindeh tepong*, on top and leaving it overnight. The dough was then used to roll *kueh ee*.

How to gelek perfectly round kueh ee

This is an annual ritual that everyone at home enjoys. The matriarch typically leads the family in making *kueh ee*. She divides the dough into two portions, one bigger than the other. The bigger portion is meant for white *kueh ee* while the smaller portion is for the red ones. White and



red *kueh ee* symbolise the *yang* (male) and *yin* (female) elements of human nature.

First, the wet glutinous flour is shaped into several long rolls. Each roll is then broken into many small pellets of equal size. Each pellet is shaped or *gelek* into a round *kueh ee* between the palms of both hands. Girls are expected to crowd around the table to help the matriarch and their aunts to *gelek kueh ee*. It is optional for the boys to be involved. Each and every *kueh ee* must be perfectly round. It is a privilege for the girls to learn how to make *kueh ee*. Everyone must observe complete silence during the making of *kueh ee* as talk might escalate into a quarrel that could spell trouble afoot in the coming year. Silence also enables better concentration to achieving the perfect roundedness of all *kueh ee*. The white *kueh ee* are made first, then the red. All the completed *kueh ee* are placed in a tray lined with a piece of cloth. They are left undisturbed to "dry out" overnight.

Next morning, a big pot of water is put to boil and the *kueh ee* is dropped into the boiling water in batches of 10 at a time. When cooked, the *kueh ee* is scooped out of the pot and placed into a second vat of cold water to cool and firm up. Then they are put in small bowls of thick syrup made of rock sugar flavoured with pandan leaves.

Lucky numbers from kueh ee?

In times past, one form of illegal betting was called *chap ji ki* which literally means twelve numbers. Bets were placed on one of 12 numbers.

To get two lucky numbers, take 12 *kueh ee* while in the dough form. Stuff each of them with a piece of paper with a number written on it. Numbers 1, 2, 3, 7, 8 and 9 are stuffed into white *kueh ee* while numbers 4, 5, 6, 10, 11 and 12 are stuffed into the red ones. Toss all the 12 *kueh ee* into a pot of boiling water. Wait patiently but be alert! The first *kueh ee* to float up has to be scooped out quickly. Then look out for the second one that floats. Cut open the two *kueh ees* when they are cold and look for the paper with a number on it. Bet on the two numbers. Try your luck on Tang Chek by adapting the method to 4D or Toto. Good luck! ♦

CATALOGUE OF TREASURES

By Colin Chee



Singapore's newest boutique museum on Armenian Road, Peranakan Museum, has attracted 114,000 visitors since its opening in April this year.

"It is on track to exceed its first year target of 180,000 visitors," said Kenson Kwok, Director of the Asian Civilisations Museum (above, standing on left).

At the launch of the museum's *Junk to Jewels* catalogue on 11 October, 2008, Kenson said: "This specially curated exhibition of artefacts is important to the extent that they reflect and tell stories of family histories. For the individuals who contributed to this exhibition, specially curated to coincide with the opening of the museum, the sentiment and personal history attached to the artefacts override all other scholarly considerations, elevating something quite ordinary to the status of a precious heirloom."

"Having this exhibition side by side with the Peranakan Museum's galleries has created an exciting and thought-provoking juxtaposition, the public museum versus the personal museum," Kenson observed.

Kenson thanked Baba Peter Lee of the Peranakan Association for seemingly effortlessly putting the exhibition together at short notice.

Peter said he felt humbled curating the show. "It has been a privileged entry, or perhaps intrusion, into the lives of individuals and families. The trust bestowed in allowing an outsider into the inner sanctums of personal and family life has been awe-inspiring and profoundly moving."

Peter said he had been to almost thirty living rooms, where families assembled to remember and retell their triumphs, regrets and unforgettable memories, even scandals!

"Some have clearly come to terms with the past, while others are creatively drawing from it," Peter observed. "Then there are some who have still found no closure."

For many of the over 100,000 visitors to the museum to

date, *Junk to Jewels* was an unexpected highlight of the whole show.

Said an American visitor: "*Junk to Jewels* was a gem. It revealed to my wife and me a side of life in Singapore that we were not even aware of. It was intriguing."

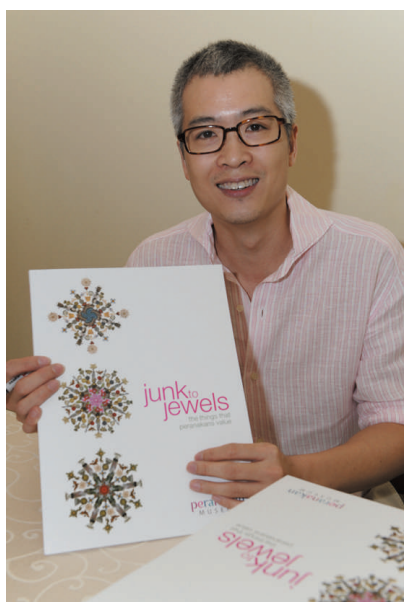
Feedback from local visitors has also been more than encouraging. The way layers of personal histories unfolded brought life to the artefacts that were displayed - from the humdrum items of hand-written recipe books, to letters to Dick Lee's manuscripts for *Beauty World*, Singapore's landmark 1988 musical, and the highest quality silver ware.

Junk to Jewels, the publication, has an apt subtitle - *The things that Peranakans value*.

We are not necessarily talking about the \$100,000 colourful *kamcheng* but rather the *surat kawen* (bethrothal letters) of Madam Chew Teck Neo. Explained daughter Roberta Wee: "I looked after my mother in her old age and while tidying her things came across a checked cloth bundle containing all these Chinese documents. I had no idea what they were. My mother simply explained, "*Gua punya surat kawen*" (my wedding documents)".

Nor even about a priceless red and gold and elaborately carved namwood wedding cupboard, but rather a sequined cheongsam that many nyonys wore in the early 20th century. By the 1920s and 1930s, *sarong kebayas* were only worn by married women. But at events where Europeans were present or were the hosts, the cheongsam was considered more formal and appropriate. Agnes Tan, daughter of Tun Tan Cheng Lock (1883-1960), businessman founder of the Malayan Chinese Association, began wearing cheongsams when she came of age and was old enough to help her father host important guests at his Malacca residence. ❖

The catalogue meticulously records commonplace utensils, memorabilia and fine works of art that have become heirlooms of nearly 30 families. It is being retailed at \$10.00 (before GST) at reputable bookshops.



Baba Peter Lee at the launch of his book.

STRAINING SUBCULTURES

A review of *Subculture* by Underground Theatre

By Emeric Lau

It all started as a series of misunderstandings, for the most part, between the True Blue Peranakan Restaurant and the punk community who regard The Substation as their homeground. Perceiving the punks' presence on the common five-foot way that runs across both their unit fronts as detrimental to his business, restaurant proprietor Benjamin Seck contacted the police and requested that the punks not loiter there. This prompted performance artist Zai Kuning to stage a mini protest in defense of the punks. It also sparked an email debate at the online Yahoo E-group, ArtsCommunity.

These events served as inspiration for playwright Dew M Chaiyanara's *Subculture*, a production highlighting issues between and within the two communities.

The play proved an engaging deconstruction of identity. Both punk and Peranakan cultures are oft misunderstood by mainstream Singapore and as a result, the members of each community cherish their uniqueness to the point of fanaticism. Stereotypical quick-tempered punk characters faced off against equally flat caricatures of Peranakans frantic to preserve the purity of their bloodline and cuisine. Caught up in the minutiae of their everyday lives and practices, both communities failed, in their precious few moments of interaction, to grasp that they actually share quite a number of the same values. The outcome was a confrontational impasse.

The plot revolves around a coffeeshop owned by Sam (played by Hemang Yadav), whose regular customers comprise the punks who hold their gigs nearby. As Sam's coffee shop is threatened with foreclosure, he sells it to a Peranakan family who turn it into a cafe called True Blood, and retain Sam as a waiter. The Peranakans then face the question of how to improve their cafe business so that they won't lose all their money, and the punks' presence is viewed as a threat to their livelihood. The punks, for their part, face difficulties raising funding for their gigs, the revenue of which goes towards kidney dialysis for the mother of one of their members. With finances a problem facing both communities, a win-win situation was tabled in a moment of idealism when one of the True Blood nyonyas actually falls for a member of the punks, and proposes that the cafe sponsor their gig. Sadly, her offer is crudely rejected. Things then spiral downwards to a painful conclusion: Sam is fired for voicing his empathy towards the punks, while both the punks and the



Peranakans are metaphorically obliterated with trash bags placed over their heads in the final tableau. It is a sobering lesson on how enmity stemming from superficial judgements benefits none.

To preserve one's identity, one needs to build, not burn bridges. We need to invest the time and effort to understand one another so that we can appreciate points of commonality.

The production, while on a shoestring budget, was laced tightly together through adept direction, an intelligent, evenly-paced script, and an enthusiastic and talented cast. Max Ling and Candice De Rozario, in particular, stood out for their respective portrayals of a foul-mouthed but tender-hearted punk and a domineering *bibik* consumed by the worry of having no descendants. The audience was treated to glimpses of cultures so apparently different yet similar in their quest for survival.

While the cover of the programme sheet carries a disclaimer stating that the play "is not a re-enactment of actual events" and that "characters portrayed are purely fictional", the call to build bridges should certainly be applied to the way we live our lives. ♦



**Isn't it time
to leap
into a much
bigger
market?**

We provide the required functions you need on your web site to prepare your business for a successful launch in the cyberworld.

- an online catalog
- an online store with shopping cart system
- an online booking and reservation system
- an online billing & invoicing system
- a blog site
- a community system
- a forum
- or just a 24 X 7 X 365 live company brochure, promoting your company

MAKING IT HAPPEN IS OUR EXPERTISE!

Contact Us:
Caveman International Pte. Ltd.
www.CavemanIntl.com
Sales@CavemanIntl.com
Need more info, call Vivian at 6748-8077

what some of our customers say about us...

"Caveman's promptness in responding to our requests coupled with their professionalism and commitment in recommending cost-effective solutions for our needs impressed me." *Executive Director, Matthew James International*

"I fondly remembered the ability of Caveman International Pte Ltd to design customer oriented web sites as Objective, Prompt, Friendly and most importantly Value for money. I strongly recommend their services to my friends and clients. Thank you." *Chief Executive Officer, City Net Employment Agency Pte Ltd*

"When Caveman hand the new site to me, it perform way above my expectation and the quality of the picture and layout is outstanding. They had put in all the things I wanted and even make it better. All the credits goes to Caveman's technical & design team. The price that I paid for is half the price that my friend paid for his website and he even comment that my website can interact with customer. I strongly recommend anyone who want a website or upgrade their website, do give Caveman International a call. You will not regret it. Thanks!" *Managing Director, Migoto Aquaworld Pte Ltd*



"Attention Business Owners!

**Free 20 Minutes Consultation Reveals How To Gain
More Cash Flow In Your Business Accounts ... Even
Though GST Is Rising!"**

Are you aware that late submissions of GST may result in you ending up in the Subordinate Courts of Singapore? Are you paying thousands of dollars of fines to IRAS because your GST Filings are not submitted in the proper order and on time? Do you find yourself running out of time, losing thousands of dollars just because you are busy growing your business and have no time getting your business accounts in order?

If so, this will be the most important message you'll ever read!

I have important information that can immediately help you to save thousands of dollars...and leave you with more money in your business accounts.



For a free 20-minutes phone consultation, call
9487-9323, Ms Ivy Ng,
Accounts & GST Strategist.

This consultation is offered at no cost or obligation to you.

Thank you.

MAKCHIM (THE STEPMOTHER)

Emeric Lau finds this stepmother has a few missteps

Perhaps we could blame that evergreen fairy tale, Cinderella? The term "stepmother" immediately conjures the idea of a stern, unreasonable woman with hidden agendas, hell bent on making the lives of those in her adopted family as miserable as possible - an extremely unfavourable and prejudiced view. Gunong Sayang's Makchim was an attempt to re-cast stepmothers in a different light.

Irene Ong stars in the title role as stepmother Swee Gek Neo, and is supported by a largely veteran cast from the GSA. Notable turns include Shirley Tay as Amanda, Gek Neo's Filipina maid, and Y M Lee as Tachi Tong, a family friend of the Swees. Tay and Lee kept the onstage energy from flagging with a repertoire of campy one-liners that had the audience roaring with laughter: "This biscuit from Khong Guan or Thye Hong, ah? Aiye, sudah lau hong!"

The play's apparent "hook" was to keep the audience in suspense as to what, to quote the programme, Gek Neo had up her kebaya sleeves. Unfortunately, the storyline remained largely undeveloped. The audience followed



the *bibiks* from one living room setting to another and back, lapping up the humorous banter that proved an effective distraction from the fact that the plot had been all but lost somewhere along the line. Indeed, it could be said that the highly engaging exchanges were at once the play's highlight and

its undoing.

At the end, a few awkward and incongruous emotional outbursts served as a convenient climax to a non-existent plot as Gek Neo was revealed to really have the best interests of all three of her sons (of which she only bore the youngest) at heart. With no prior build-up, and all tension between scenes eased away with languid set-changing musical interludes by Band Dendang Irama and The Bibik Singers, it was a non-event when this *makchim* proved to be a sphinx without a secret.

Still, from the contented faces of those leaving the theatre, it could be seen that Makchim had delivered its promise of an adequately entertaining Peranakan evening, and serves to keep a certain tradition of Peranakan community theatre alive. ♦



Tel: +65 97982176

SUPPLIER OF CONTEMPORARY PERANAKAN (NYONYA) PORCELAINS, FINE REPOS FROM CHINA.

KRIS DECOR



Email for purchase or enquiry: krisong@ymail.com or christineong@krisdecor.com

A TREASURE TROVE OF VINTAGE COLLECTIBLES

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



THE HERITAGE SHOP

93 Jalan Sultan #01-01 (opposite Sultan Plaza)

Tel/Fax: 62237982 HP: 96861071

Email: theheritageshop@gmail.com

TWO GOOD YET TRUE: BABA HOUSE OPENS

By Emeric Lau

Held consecutively on 4 and 5 September 2008, the twin opening ceremonies of Baba House at 157 Neil Road gave Peranakans in Singapore a second cause for celebration within a year, the first being the opening of the Peranakan Museum on Armenian Street in April.

Graced by President S R Nathan, the 4 September ceremony commenced with a lion dance, followed by the unveiling (below, left) of a dedication plaque by the President and Ms Agnes Tan (daughter of Tun Tan Cheng Lock), whose generous gift of the house to NUS enabled its restoration. Delivering a graceful speech, Prof Shih Choon Fong of NUS represented the academic community in conveying their gratitude (top, right). The Baba House is managed by the NUS Museum and serves as a resource for furthering historical research into the lifestyle of typical Peranakan families in the culture's heyday during the 1920s.

The event on 5 September was officiated by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, George Yeo. His reflections of the occasion can be accessed at his blog: beyondsg.typepad.com where he applauds the recent revival of Peranakan culture and shares his family's take on things Baba.

Guests on both evenings toured the three-level townhouse, authentically furnished as a fin-de-siecle Baba home. Through the efforts of honorary curator Baba Peter Lee and the project team at NUS, carefully procured antiques and artefacts, some even donated by the original Peranakans who lived there, the Wee family, shine anew. The first two



Lee Kip Lee (left) and Prof Shih Choon Fong (right) address the audience.

levels were restored as authentic household spaces. The third level was converted into a contemporary gallery that currently features an exhibition of papercraft examining the innermost desires and anxieties of Peranakans through Baba motifs and icons – a "Psychotaxonomy of Home", as artist Michael Lee Hong Hwee dubs his work.

In addition, Baba House boasts a spanking new rear extension with premises for the NUS Museum office and The Peranakan Association, and an elevator to enable the physically-challenged to enjoy a full house tour.

Everyone tucked into a mouthwatering feast of (what else?) Peranakan cuisine spread over the three levels, with the *tok panjang* in the family hall especially set for the President and his party.

With Baba House now open, we can conclude that 2008 has truly been a landmark year for the Peranakan renaissance, ❖



President SR Nathan unveiling the bronze plaque commemorating the opening, with donor Agnes Tan (left). Guests arrive for the opening (right).

Tours

Admission to Baba House is free, but tour rates apply.
(Note: max 12 pax each tour)
Fee: \$10 per pax
(Peranakan Association Members: \$5, Students: \$5, NUS Students: \$3)



Wednesday and Thursday

10-11am; 11:45-12:45pm; 2-3pm; 4-5pm

Friday and Sunday

3-4pm only

Saturday

Private functions only



All visits are by appointment only.
Please contact:
Tel: 6227 5731
Fax: 6227 8743
Email: babahouse@nus.edu.sg

Address:
157 Neil Road
Singapore 088883

POEMS INSPIRED BY BABA HOUSE 157, NEIL ROAD, SINGAPORE



Sayang Airwell

By Heng Siok Tian

Airwell
in the centre of a baba home
shows me
a mosaic of blue.

Like a pre-hologram,
glimpsing an early sky:

I see amahs in samfoos
in their time and space
squatting here,
washing, working within the marbled
squares,
for big master and mistress who slept
above,
for little masters they would sayang
and love.

Where was their half of the sky?
next to babas and nonyas twirling,
whirling with a gramophone in an
upstairs dance studio
now,
the play den of fruit bats when
owners upgraded,
layered with droppings, so
decomposed they become
earth.

To first lose the turquoise of mosaic
blue,
then the shapes of carved zodiac
animals,
to leave them with the wings of bats,
to touch again these losses
as I linger on the airwell,
so sayang,
sayang.

*This poem was first published in
"Over There, Poems from Singapore
and Australia" (2008), Ethos Books.*

Neil Road House

By Paul Tan

It's probably true that I've played
host
to so many, some of my guests
must have been imagined -
the batiked matriarch sobbing into
an embroidered hankie;
the brat whose prank was punished
with a smear of chilli;
the schoolgirls hiding
when the gentlemen called -
their lilting laughter funnelled
through peep holes,
feting the rooms,
today's three stories of gloom.

I remember the phonograph,
the first phone, its shrill tinkles,
the jolt of first electricity,
before it becomes a blur
of passing bodies talking, walking,
heaving, leaving,
rearranged furniture,
coins dropped in corners
and other accidents,
bye bye to the nightsoil man,
tvs tittering till dawn,
dialogue, skipping images,
black, white, colour.

The rooms are cold at night,
my passages tickle.
I clear my throat,
and cough out bats;
flapping sounds, shrieks,
escape through the
gaps between my teeth.

*Paul Tan, based in Tokyo, is Regional
Director, Singapore Tourism Board.*

A NEW PERANAKAN AFFILIATE IN KL

By Cedric Tan

Wednesday, 6 August, 2008 marked the birth of the *Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor* (PPBNKLS) when it received official approval from the Malaysian Registrar of Societies. Set to attract Peranakans and enthusiasts alike, its constitution stipulates that all members must be at least 1/16 Peranakan. Everyone living in Selangor or KL with at least one Peranakan great-grandparent is urged to grab a membership form and join us!

The seed of an association was first mooted at the late Datin Seri Endon's 'The Nyonya Kebaya – A Legacy Exhibition and Symposium' way back on 15 March 2003

at the KL National Arts Gallery. It really gained momentum at another major Peranakan event two years later - 'The World of Peranakans Exhibition and Symposium' in the KL Museum Negara on 3 February 2005. Noting that interest was at an all time high, a group of inspired nyonys led by Mrs Doris Lee took it upon themselves to realize their long-cherished dream by exchanging contacts with other Peranakans living in the Klang Valley.

Sadly, the birth of the Association coincided with the untimely passing of the prime mover, Mrs Doris Lee, on 4 October 2005, just a few days after the inaugural AGM. Though she has left

us, we remember her with gratitude for laying the foundation to realize not only her dream but also our hopes for our next generation as well as others who can learn from this unique culture. ❖

PPBNKLS Committee

President - Dr Lee Su Kim
Vice President -Dato Yeo Hock Siew
Hon. Secretary - Mdm Lim Yulin
Asst. Hon. Secretary - Mr Cedric Tan
Hon. Treasurer - Mrs Helen Tam
Asst. Hon. Treasurer - Mdm Patricia Teh

Members

Mr Teh Beng Boon
Mr Chua Leng Kee
Mr Ee Hock Chuan
Mr Lee Cheng Yan
Mrs Doris Lee
Mdm Quay Leng Neo

Auditors

Mr Tay Hoon Lim
Mrs Anne Yuen

Trustees

Dato Yeo Hock Siew
Mr Lee Cheng Yan
Mdm Stephanie Chong Mei Lin

For more information, please email peranakan_kl@yahoo.com.my.



LEARNING JOURNEYS

CHIJ Our Lady of Good Counsel (OLGC) contributes to Peranakan heritage.

By Maureen Ching, teacher

Our National Education Gallery was set up by a group of teachers with the intention of educating our pupils about the diversity of the different cultures and races in Singapore. The gallery was opened on 1 August 2008 by Mr S Iswaran, Senior Minister of State for Trade & Industry, at the official opening of our new school building.

The Gallery features Chinese and Indian shop houses, reminiscent of different scenes of old Singapore, the Eurasian culture and an old Malay kampong house that is a rarity in Singapore. The highlight is the Peranakan Heritage Corner.

Our Peranakan corner is important as it offers an opportunity for the school to highlight a culture that is truly unique to Singapore's heritage. Intricate Peranakan display cupboards and a dressing table adorn the main area. Porcelain, clothes and accessories such as *kasot manek*



Students and teachers at the gallery opening officiated by Minister S Iswaran. Maureen is third from left, in the orange kebaya.

(beaded slippers) are also featured. Most of the items displayed are contributions from the staff and well wishers of the school.

The Gallery will also serve as a 'Learning Journeys' of sorts to conduct story-telling sessions and lessons that integrate subjects such as Social Studies, English, Mother-Tongue, Art & Craft. Pupils can play traditional games here. ❖

Anyone interested to learn more can email chijolgc@moe.edu.sg

SEMAYANG ABU AT TAN TOCK SENG'S 210TH BIRTHDAY: THE SECOND REUNION

19 – 25 July, 2009 • Singapore and Malacca

An informal gathering initiated by 5th generation descendant Juliet Ong in 2002 led to the first family reunion of the Tan Tock Seng clan in September 2005. Three years after, 150 descendants came together for the week-long second reunion. Melbourne-based 5th generation Baba **David Neo** reports.

This was my first Tan Tock Seng (TTS) reunion. I knew that my great-great-grandmother, Tan Tiang Neo, was his daughter because our family had kept her 80th birthday invitation, which indicated the relationship. For years, I tried to find out more, even researching at the National Archives. But the patriarchal nature of Chinese culture revealed no record of the female lineage.

As luck would have it, a friend from Singapore sent me a Straits Times cutting of a Tan Tock Seng reunion after seeing the faded, sepia photograph of Tan Tiang Neo in my living room. I recognised a fellow church-goer, Claudine Chionh (6th generation), in the article. She referred me to Lawrence Tan (6th generation), who works for Scotland Yard in London and runs the TTS website, where I have been blogging for the last three years with my long-lost relatives around the world, most of whom I have never met. Lawrence has been painstakingly constructing the TTS family tree for the last 10 years.

To date there are 1,429 descendants scattered across the world. The reunion brought together a diaspora of descendants from Australia, Hong Kong, the UK, US and Thailand. ❖

“It was fantastic connecting with relatives from all over the world, a feeling of great comfort and affirmation of our heritage and identity. I grew up feeling a loss of identity in KL as I was never accepted by the Chinese, neither was I accepted by the Malays because I was not Muslim; my best friends were Indian girls. I feel I have finally found my identity, finally come home...”

Evelyn Trotter, a museologist and a nonya hanyut (adrift) as her mom describes her, has spent the last 30 years in the US.



The reunion dinner in Malacca.



Semayang abu at the graves of Tan Tock Seng and his son, Tan Kim Ching.



TAN TOCK SENG (1798-1850)

Tan Tock Seng was a Singaporean merchant and philanthropist. Born in Malacca in 1798 to an immigrant Hokkien father and Hokkien Peranakan mother, he rose from humble origins to become one of Singapore's richest men. Most of his wealth came from his real estate speculations with J H Whitehead of Shaw, Whitehead & Co. He owned large tracts of prime land. In 1844, he contributed S\$5,000 to the construction of a hospital on top of Pearl's Hill. The hospital, named after him, was later moved to its present Tan Tock Seng Road as it outgrew its original location.

WELCOME

We welcome our new life members:

1. Mr. Raphael Koh Yew Lee
2. Mdm Lim Bee Lee
3. Mr Lim Chen Sian
4. Mdm Dianna Tok
5. Miss Jackie Yoong Gee Kee

21ST BABA NYONYA CONVENTION MALACCA, 5 – 7 DECEMBER 2008

**"Towards Greater Awareness of our
Baba Nyonya Heritage"**

Package cost: S\$323 - \$350 (twin/triple-sharing) and **S\$438 - \$450 (single)** includes return trip via air-conditioned VIP 26-seater coach with guide service, accommodation at Hotel Equatorial Melaka inclusive of breakfast, Peranakan lunches, convention dinners on Friday and Saturday, seminar, half-day city tour, driver & guide tips and travel insurance.

To avoid any disappointment, please register with Mrs Lim Geok Huay at 6255-0704 or Mr Chan Eng Thai at 6538-8280.

Important: The convention is during the super-peak travel period so please book early.

More details and the form can be downloaded from www.peranakan.org.sg.

圣徒相通

Communion of

ALL SAINTS
FUNERAL SERVICES PTE LTD



DR ERIC YEO, DIRECTOR
HP: 9652 2031

*"At COMMUNION
OF ALL SAINTS, we
are "kindred" in the
deepest sense of the
word. We belong to
the family of God and
share a common
spiritual life with
Christ Jesus."*

WHOLLY OWNED BY DR ERIC YEO

- **SERVICING EXCLUSIVELY ALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES**
- **24-HOUR ONE STOP SERVICE**
- **24-HOUR DOCTOR CERTIFICATION**

24 hours – HP: 9652 2031

127 Lavender Street, Singapore 338735
(Next to Singapore Casket) Tel: 6297 7117

THE PERANAKAN BALL ORGANISING COMMITTEE

Bebe Seet
John Lee
Monica Alsagoff
Sng Geok Huay
Claire Seet
Alvin Yapp
Mabel Long
Emeric Lau
Alan Koh

The Peranakan Ball committee would like to thank all sponsors and everyone who helped out in one way or another to make the 108th Dinner & Dance on 14 November 2008 a big success.

Intercontinental Singapore
Raffles Town Club
ACM- The Peranakan Museum
Beiersdorf Singapore
Chilli Padi Nonya Restaurant
The Blue Ginger Restaurant
Ang Eng Baju Kebaya
Guan Antiques
House of Cheongsam
Asialink House
The Whole Earth Vegetarian Restaurant
Body Contours
Kebayalah!
Asiapac Books
DNA Beauty
True Colours Makeup Cosmetics
Goh Joo Hin
Ms Marilyn Tan
Katong Antique House
Kim Choo Kueh Chang
Kevin Seah Haute Couture
Mr Loh Lik Peng (Majestic Hotel)
Pan Pacific Hotel

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
Email: 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>.



Baba House. This new heritage house at 157 Neil Road opened on 4 September 2008. Go back in time to 1928 and experience what a grand Peranakan row house would have been like. Owned by the Wee family (whose ancestor Wee Bin was a mid-

19th century shipping magnate) since 1910, the house was sold in 2005 to the National University of Singapore and is now run by NUS Museum. Funds for the purchase and restoration were donated by Agnes Tan, in memory of her father Tun Tan Cheng Lock. On the gallery at level 3, A Psychotaxonomy of Home by Hong Kong-based Singapore contemporary artist Michael Lee Hong Hwee, reinterprets with paper cut-outs the symbolism of the flora and fauna and mythical beasts found in a Peranakan house. Baba House, 157 Neil Road, Singapore. Tel: 62275731. Visits are by appointment only.

Free admission. \$10 for guided tours. Please call the house for details.
<http://www.nus.edu.sg/museum/baba/index.html>

Asian Civilisations Museum. Neither East Nor West: Asians in Monochrome, at the Special Exhibitions Gallery until 1 February 2009, showcases a collection of 40 portraits by Lafayette Studio of London belonging to the Islamic Arts Museum, Kuala Lumpur, made from negatives housed at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Also featured are 12 portraits by the studio of G R Lambert, Singapore.



Madame Wellington Koo (photograph courtesy of Asian Civilisations Museum)

Subjects include Madame Wellington Koo, daughter of sugar baron Oei Tiong Ham, and Dr Lim Boon Keng, who was president of the Straits Chinese British Association (former name of The Peranakan Association). Civilisations Museum, 1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555, Tel: 63322982, Opening Hours: 9am to 7pm (Tuesdays to Saturdays), 1pm to 7pm (Mondays), Admission \$8 (adults), \$4 (senior citizens and students). <http://www.acm.org.sg>

National Library. Now on: A fascinating exhibition on level 10 about the people behind Singapore's street names, including biographies, photographs and documents from the Koh Seow Chuan collection, about prominent Peranakans such as Tan Kim Seng and Tan Tock Seng. National Library, 100 Victoria Street, Singapore 188064, Tel: 63323255, Opening Hours: 10am-9pm (Daily), Closed on Public Holidays. <http://www.nl.sg>

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/soa/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.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.

TANG CHEK

By Tan Kuning

Tang Chek (Winter Solstice) falls annually on 22 December in the 11th month of the Chinese calendar. Tang Chek literally means Winter (*Tang*) has arrived (*Chek*). It is a day of celebration signifying that the whole family has survived the year after the winter. If there is death in the family that year, *kueh ee* (glutinous rice dumplings) cannot be served. To symbolise family unity, *kueh ee* in syrup is made only on Tang Chek for both consumption and as a thanksgiving offering to the Kitchen God and the ancestral spirits who are believed to be the protectors of family safety.

Early on Tang Chek morning, offerings comprising several bowls of *kueh ee* in syrup are offered to the Kitchen God and spirits of the ancestors respectively. If there is a well within the compound, a bowl of *kueh ee* must also be offered to the spirit of the well. Two pieces of *kueh ee*, one red and the other white, must be stuck behind the main door of the house as an offering to the spirit of the door. These two pieces of *kueh ee* are left to dry out and remain stuck behind the door for months to bless the family for the coming year.

Tang Chek also marks the start of a gradual build up to Chinese New Year. Children are reminded of its approach by their elders. A grandmother might say to them, "Today is Tang Chek and every child has grown one year older. Be on your best behaviour and don't cry over trivial matters." (*"Hari ini Tang Chek. Dari hari ini budak budak semua sudah besar satu taon. Jaga perangai baik baik. Tak boleh sikit sikit buat menangis!"*)

After laying out the *kueh ee* offerings, all the bowls are collected and the *kueh ee* returned to the pot for a second boiling. This time, they are distributed for human consumption. To give it a Peranakan twist, coconut milk is added to make it *lemak*.

Peranakan *kueh ee* is made of glutinous rice flour (*pulot*) without any filling. Commercially available versions are bigger and may contain fillings of red bean or lotus paste. In the days when glutinous flour was not available in the market, almost every Peranakan home had a *batu boh* (a heavy grinder made of granite) to grind wet glutinous rice manually. The ground flour was put into a sack and the water pressed out by placing a heavy granite grinder, *tindeh tepong*, on top and leaving it overnight. The dough was then used to roll *kueh ee*.

How to gelek perfectly round kueh ee

This is an annual ritual that everyone at home enjoys. The matriarch typically leads the family in making *kueh ee*. She divides the dough into two portions, one bigger than the other. The bigger portion is meant for white *kueh ee* while the smaller portion is for the red ones. White and



red *kueh ee* symbolise the *yang* (male) and *yin* (female) elements of human nature.

First, the wet glutinous flour is shaped into several long rolls. Each roll is then broken into many small pellets of equal size. Each pellet is shaped or *gelek* into a round *kueh ee* between the palms of both hands. Girls are expected to crowd around the table to help the matriarch and their aunts to *gelek kueh ee*. It is optional for the boys to be involved. Each and every *kueh ee* must be perfectly round. It is a privilege for the girls to learn how to make *kueh ee*. Everyone must observe complete silence during the making of *kueh ee* as talk might escalate into a quarrel that could spell trouble afoot in the coming year. Silence also enables better concentration to achieving the perfect roundedness of all *kueh ee*. The white *kueh ee* are made first, then the red. All the completed *kueh ee* are placed in a tray lined with a piece of cloth. They are left undisturbed to "dry out" overnight.

Next morning, a big pot of water is put to boil and the *kueh ee* is dropped into the boiling water in batches of 10 at a time. When cooked, the *kueh ee* is scooped out of the pot and placed into a second vat of cold water to cool and firm up. Then they are put in small bowls of thick syrup made of rock sugar flavoured with pandan leaves.

Lucky numbers from kueh ee?

In times past, one form of illegal betting was called *chap ji ki* which literally means twelve numbers. Bets were placed on one of 12 numbers.

To get two lucky numbers, take 12 *kueh ee* while in the dough form. Stuff each of them with a piece of paper with a number written on it. Numbers 1, 2, 3, 7, 8 and 9 are stuffed into white *kueh ee* while numbers 4, 5, 6, 10, 11 and 12 are stuffed into the red ones. Toss all the 12 *kueh ee* into a pot of boiling water. Wait patiently but be alert! The first *kueh ee* to float up has to be scooped out quickly. Then look out for the second one that floats. Cut open the two *kueh ees* when they are cold and look for the paper with a number on it. Bet on the two numbers. Try your luck on Tang Chek by adapting the method to 4D or Toto. Good luck! ♦

CATALOGUE OF TREASURES

By Colin Chee



Singapore's newest boutique museum on Armenian Road, Peranakan Museum, has attracted 114,000 visitors since its opening in April this year.

"It is on track to exceed its first year target of 180,000 visitors," said Kenson Kwok, Director of the Asian Civilisations Museum (above, standing on left).

At the launch of the museum's *Junk to Jewels* catalogue on 11 October, 2008, Kenson said: "This specially curated exhibition of artefacts is important to the extent that they reflect and tell stories of family histories. For the individuals who contributed to this exhibition, specially curated to coincide with the opening of the museum, the sentiment and personal history attached to the artefacts override all other scholarly considerations, elevating something quite ordinary to the status of a precious heirloom."

"Having this exhibition side by side with the Peranakan Museum's galleries has created an exciting and thought-provoking juxtaposition, the public museum versus the personal museum," Kenson observed.

Kenson thanked Baba Peter Lee of the Peranakan Association for seemingly effortlessly putting the exhibition together at short notice.

Peter said he felt humbled curating the show. "It has been a privileged entry, or perhaps intrusion, into the lives of individuals and families. The trust bestowed in allowing an outsider into the inner sanctums of personal and family life has been awe-inspiring and profoundly moving."

Peter said he had been to almost thirty living rooms, where families assembled to remember and retell their triumphs, regrets and unforgettable memories, even scandals!

"Some have clearly come to terms with the past, while others are creatively drawing from it," Peter observed. "Then there are some who have still found no closure."

For many of the over 100,000 visitors to the museum to

date, *Junk to Jewels* was an unexpected highlight of the whole show.

Said an American visitor: "*Junk to Jewels* was a gem. It revealed to my wife and me a side of life in Singapore that we were not even aware of. It was intriguing."

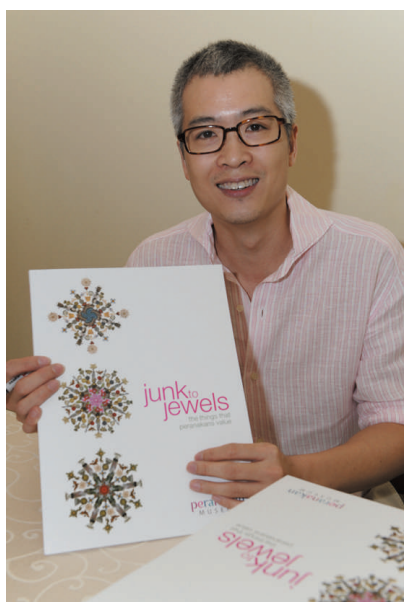
Feedback from local visitors has also been more than encouraging. The way layers of personal histories unfolded brought life to the artefacts that were displayed - from the humdrum items of hand-written recipe books, to letters to Dick Lee's manuscripts for *Beauty World*, Singapore's landmark 1988 musical, and the highest quality silver ware.

Junk to Jewels, the publication, has an apt subtitle - *The things that Peranakans value*.

We are not necessarily talking about the \$100,000 colourful *kamcheng* but rather the *surat kawen* (bethrothal letters) of Madam Chew Teck Neo. Explained daughter Roberta Wee: "I looked after my mother in her old age and while tidying her things came across a checked cloth bundle containing all these Chinese documents. I had no idea what they were. My mother simply explained, "*Gua punya surat kawen*" (my wedding documents)".

Nor even about a priceless red and gold and elaborately carved namwood wedding cupboard, but rather a sequined cheongsam that many nyonys wore in the early 20th century. By the 1920s and 1930s, *sarong kebayas* were only worn by married women. But at events where Europeans were present or were the hosts, the cheongsam was considered more formal and appropriate. Agnes Tan, daughter of Tun Tan Cheng Lock (1883-1960), businessman founder of the Malayan Chinese Association, began wearing cheongsams when she came of age and was old enough to help her father host important guests at his Malacca residence. ❖

The catalogue meticulously records commonplace utensils, memorabilia and fine works of art that have become heirlooms of nearly 30 families. It is being retailed at \$10.00 (before GST) at reputable bookshops.



Baba Peter Lee at the launch of his book.

STRAINING SUBCULTURES

A review of *Subculture* by Underground Theatre

By Emeric Lau

It all started as a series of misunderstandings, for the most part, between the True Blue Peranakan Restaurant and the punk community who regard The Substation as their homeground. Perceiving the punks' presence on the common five-foot way that runs across both their unit fronts as detrimental to his business, restaurant proprietor Benjamin Seck contacted the police and requested that the punks not loiter there. This prompted performance artist Zai Kuning to stage a mini protest in defense of the punks. It also sparked an email debate at the online Yahoo E-group, ArtsCommunity.

These events served as inspiration for playwright Dew M Chaiyanara's *Subculture*, a production highlighting issues between and within the two communities.

The play proved an engaging deconstruction of identity. Both punk and Peranakan cultures are oft misunderstood by mainstream Singapore and as a result, the members of each community cherish their uniqueness to the point of fanaticism. Stereotypical quick-tempered punk characters faced off against equally flat caricatures of Peranakans frantic to preserve the purity of their bloodline and cuisine. Caught up in the minutiae of their everyday lives and practices, both communities failed, in their precious few moments of interaction, to grasp that they actually share quite a number of the same values. The outcome was a confrontational impasse.

The plot revolves around a coffeeshop owned by Sam (played by Hemang Yadav), whose regular customers comprise the punks who hold their gigs nearby. As Sam's coffee shop is threatened with foreclosure, he sells it to a Peranakan family who turn it into a cafe called True Blood, and retain Sam as a waiter. The Peranakans then face the question of how to improve their cafe business so that they won't lose all their money, and the punks' presence is viewed as a threat to their livelihood. The punks, for their part, face difficulties raising funding for their gigs, the revenue of which goes towards kidney dialysis for the mother of one of their members. With finances a problem facing both communities, a win-win situation was tabled in a moment of idealism when one of the True Blood nyonyas actually falls for a member of the punks, and proposes that the cafe sponsor their gig. Sadly, her offer is crudely rejected. Things then spiral downwards to a painful conclusion: Sam is fired for voicing his empathy towards the punks, while both the punks and the



Peranakans are metaphorically obliterated with trash bags placed over their heads in the final tableau. It is a sobering lesson on how enmity stemming from superficial judgements benefits none.

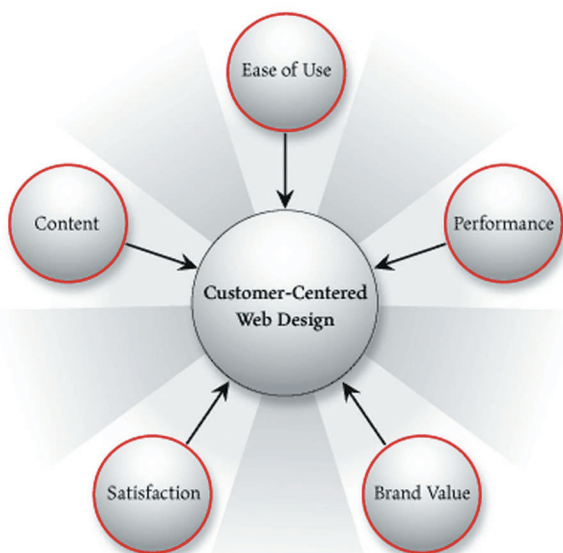
To preserve one's identity, one needs to build, not burn bridges. We need to invest the time and effort to understand one another so that we can appreciate points of commonality.

The production, while on a shoestring budget, was laced tightly together through adept direction, an intelligent, evenly-paced script, and an enthusiastic and talented cast. Max Ling and Candice De Rozario, in particular, stood out for their respective portrayals of a foul-mouthed but tender-hearted punk and a domineering *bibik* consumed by the worry of having no descendants. The audience was treated to glimpses of cultures so apparently different yet similar in their quest for survival.

While the cover of the programme sheet carries a disclaimer stating that the play "is not a re-enactment of actual events" and that "characters portrayed are purely fictional", the call to build bridges should certainly be applied to the way we live our lives. ♣



**Isn't it time
to leap
into a much
bigger
market?**



We provide the required functions you need on your web site to prepare your business for a successful launch in the cyberworld.

- an online catalog
- an online store with shopping cart system
- an online booking and reservation system
- an online billing & invoicing system
- a blog site
- a community system
- a forum
- or just a 24 X 7 X 365 live company brochure, promoting your company

MAKING IT HAPPEN IS OUR EXPERTISE!

Contact Us:
Caveman International Pte. Ltd.
www.CavemanIntl.com
Sales@CavemanIntl.com
Need more info, call Vivian at 6748-8077

what some of our customers say about us...

"Caveman's promptness in responding to our requests coupled with their professionalism and commitment in recommending cost-effective solutions for our needs impressed me." *Executive Director, Matthew James International*

"I fondly remembered the ability of Caveman International Pte Ltd to design customer oriented web sites as Objective, Prompt, Friendly and most importantly Value for money. I strongly recommend their services to my friends and clients. Thank you." *Chief Executive Officer, City Net Employment Agency Pte Ltd*

"When Caveman hand the new site to me, it perform way above my expectation and the quality of the picture and layout is outstanding. They had put in all the things I wanted and even make it better. All the credits goes to Caveman's technical & design team. The price that I paid for is half the price that my friend paid for his website and he even comment that my website can interact with customer. I strongly recommend anyone who want a website or upgrade their website, do give Caveman International a call. You will not regret it. Thanks!" *Managing Director, Migoto Aquaworld Pte Ltd*



"Attention Business Owners!

**Free 20 Minutes Consultation Reveals How To Gain
More Cash Flow In Your Business Accounts ... Even
Though GST Is Rising!"**

Are you aware that late submissions of GST may result in you ending up in the Subordinate Courts of Singapore? Are you paying thousands of dollars of fines to IRAS because your GST Filings are not submitted in the proper order and on time? Do you find yourself running out of time, losing thousands of dollars just because you are busy growing your business and have no time getting your business accounts in order?

If so, this will be the most important message you'll ever read!

I have important information that can immediately help you to save thousands of dollars...and leave you with more money in your business accounts.



For a free 20-minutes phone consultation, call
9487-9323, Ms Ivy Ng,
Accounts & GST Strategist.

This consultation is offered at no cost or obligation to you.

Thank you.

MAKCHIM (THE STEPMOTHER)

Emeric Lau finds this stepmother has a few missteps

Perhaps we could blame that evergreen fairy tale, Cinderella? The term "stepmother" immediately conjures the idea of a stern, unreasonable woman with hidden agendas, hell bent on making the lives of those in her adopted family as miserable as possible - an extremely unfavourable and prejudiced view. Gunong Sayang's Makchim was an attempt to re-cast stepmothers in a different light.

Irene Ong stars in the title role as stepmother Swee Gek Neo, and is supported by a largely veteran cast from the GSA. Notable turns include Shirley Tay as Amanda, Gek Neo's Filipina maid, and Y M Lee as Tachi Tong, a family friend of the Swees. Tay and Lee kept the onstage energy from flagging with a repertoire of campy one-liners that had the audience roaring with laughter: "This biscuit from Khong Guan or Thye Hong, ah? Aiye, sudah lau hong!"

The play's apparent "hook" was to keep the audience in suspense as to what, to quote the programme, Gek Neo had up her kebaya sleeves. Unfortunately, the storyline remained largely undeveloped. The audience followed



the *bibiks* from one living room setting to another and back, lapping up the humourous banter that proved an effective distraction from the fact that the plot had been all but lost somewhere along the line. Indeed, it could be said that the highly engaging exchanges were at once the play's highlight and

its undoing.

At the end, a few awkward and incongruous emotional outbursts served as a convenient climax to a non-existent plot as Gek Neo was revealed to really have the best interests of all three of her sons (of which she only bore the youngest) at heart. With no prior build-up, and all tension between scenes eased away with languid set-changing musical interludes by Band Dendang Irama and The Bibik Singers, it was a non-event when this *makchim* proved to be a sphinx without a secret.

Still, from the contented faces of those leaving the theatre, it could be seen that Makchim had delivered its promise of an adequately entertaining Peranakan evening, and serves to keep a certain tradition of Peranakan community theatre alive. ♦



Tel: +65 97982176

SUPPLIER OF CONTEMPORARY PERANAKAN (NYONYA) PORCELAINS, FINE REPOS FROM CHINA.

KRIS DECOR



Email for purchase or enquiry: krisong@ymail.com or christineong@krisdecor.com

A TREASURE TROVE OF VINTAGE COLLECTIBLES

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



THE HERITAGE SHOP

93 Jalan Sultan #01-01 (opposite Sultan Plaza)

Tel/Fax: 62237982 HP: 96861071

Email: theheritageshop@gmail.com

TWO GOOD YET TRUE: BABA HOUSE OPENS

By Emeric Lau

Held consecutively on 4 and 5 September 2008, the twin opening ceremonies of Baba House at 157 Neil Road gave Peranakans in Singapore a second cause for celebration within a year, the first being the opening of the Peranakan Museum on Armenian Street in April.

Graced by President S R Nathan, the 4 September ceremony commenced with a lion dance, followed by the unveiling (below, left) of a dedication plaque by the President and Ms Agnes Tan (daughter of Tun Tan Cheng Lock), whose generous gift of the house to NUS enabled its restoration. Delivering a graceful speech, Prof Shih Choon Fong of NUS represented the academic community in conveying their gratitude (top, right). The Baba House is managed by the NUS Museum and serves as a resource for furthering historical research into the lifestyle of typical Peranakan families in the culture's heyday during the 1920s.

The event on 5 September was officiated by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, George Yeo. His reflections of the occasion can be accessed at his blog: beyondsg.typepad.com where he applauds the recent revival of Peranakan culture and shares his family's take on things Baba.

Guests on both evenings toured the three-level townhouse, authentically furnished as a fin-de-siecle Baba home. Through the efforts of honorary curator Baba Peter Lee and the project team at NUS, carefully procured antiques and artefacts, some even donated by the original Peranakans who lived there, the Wee family, shine anew. The first two



Lee Kip Lee (left) and Prof Shih Choon Fong (right) address the audience.

levels were restored as authentic household spaces. The third level was converted into a contemporary gallery that currently features an exhibition of papercraft examining the innermost desires and anxieties of Peranakans through Baba motifs and icons – a "Psychotaxonomy of Home", as artist Michael Lee Hong Hwee dubs his work.

In addition, Baba House boasts a spanking new rear extension with premises for the NUS Museum office and The Peranakan Association, and an elevator to enable the physically-challenged to enjoy a full house tour.

Everyone tucked into a mouthwatering feast of (what else?) Peranakan cuisine spread over the three levels, with the *tok panjang* in the family hall especially set for the President and his party.

With Baba House now open, we can conclude that 2008 has truly been a landmark year for the Peranakan renaissance, ❖



President SR Nathan unveiling the bronze plaque commemorating the opening, with donor Agnes Tan (left). Guests arrive for the opening (right).

Tours

Admission to Baba House is free, but tour rates apply.
(Note: max 12 pax each tour)
Fee: \$10 per pax
(Peranakan Association Members: \$5, Students: \$5, NUS Students: \$3)



Wednesday and Thursday

10-11am; 11:45-12:45pm; 2-3pm; 4-5pm

Friday and Sunday

3-4pm only

Saturday

Private functions only



All visits are by appointment only.
Please contact:
Tel: 6227 5731
Fax: 6227 8743
Email: babahouse@nus.edu.sg

Address:
157 Neil Road
Singapore 088883

POEMS INSPIRED BY BABA HOUSE 157, NEIL ROAD, SINGAPORE



Sayang Airwell

By Heng Siok Tian

Airwell
in the centre of a baba home
shows me
a mosaic of blue.

Like a pre-hologram,
glimpsing an early sky:

I see amahs in samfoos
in their time and space
squatting here,
washing, working within the marbled
squares,
for big master and mistress who slept
above,
for little masters they would sayang
and love.

Where was their half of the sky?
next to babas and nonyas twirling,
whirling with a gramophone in an
upstairs dance studio
now,
the play den of fruit bats when
owners upgraded,
layered with droppings, so
decomposed they become
earth.

To first lose the turquoise of mosaic
blue,
then the shapes of carved zodiac
animals,
to leave them with the wings of bats,
to touch again these losses
as I linger on the airwell,
so sayang,
sayang.

*This poem was first published in
"Over There, Poems from Singapore
and Australia" (2008), Ethos Books.*

Neil Road House

By Paul Tan

It's probably true that I've played
host
to so many, some of my guests
must have been imagined -
the batiked matriarch sobbing into
an embroidered hankie;
the brat whose prank was punished
with a smear of chilli;
the schoolgirls hiding
when the gentlemen called -
their lilting laughter funnelled
through peep holes,
feting the rooms,
today's three stories of gloom.

I remember the phonograph,
the first phone, its shrill tinkles,
the jolt of first electricity,
before it becomes a blur
of passing bodies talking, walking,
heaving, leaving,
rearranged furniture,
coins dropped in corners
and other accidents,
bye bye to the nightsoil man,
tvs tittering till dawn,
dialogue, skipping images,
black, white, colour.

The rooms are cold at night,
my passages tickle.
I clear my throat,
and cough out bats;
flapping sounds, shrieks,
escape through the
gaps between my teeth.

*Paul Tan, based in Tokyo, is Regional
Director, Singapore Tourism Board.*

A NEW PERANAKAN AFFILIATE IN KL

By Cedric Tan

Wednesday, 6 August, 2008 marked the birth of the *Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor (PPBNKLS)* when it received official approval from the Malaysian Registrar of Societies. Set to attract Peranakans and enthusiasts alike, its constitution stipulates that all members must be at least 1/16 Peranakan. Everyone living in Selangor or KL with at least one Peranakan great-grandparent is urged to grab a membership form and join us!

The seed of an association was first mooted at the late Datin Seri Endon's 'The Nyonya Kebaya – A Legacy Exhibition and Symposium' way back on 15 March 2003

at the KL National Arts Gallery. It really gained momentum at another major Peranakan event two years later - 'The World of Peranakans Exhibition and Symposium' in the KL Museum Negara on 3 February 2005. Noting that interest was at an all time high, a group of inspired nyonys led by Mrs Doris Lee took it upon themselves to realize their long-cherished dream by exchanging contacts with other Peranakans living in the Klang Valley.

Sadly, the birth of the Association coincided with the untimely passing of the prime mover, Mrs Doris Lee, on 4 October 2005, just a few days after the inaugural AGM. Though she has left

us, we remember her with gratitude for laying the foundation to realize not only her dream but also our hopes for our next generation as well as others who can learn from this unique culture. ❖

PPBNKLS Committee

President - Dr Lee Su Kim
Vice President -Dato Yeo Hock Siew
Hon. Secretary - Mdm Lim Yulin
Asst. Hon. Secretary - Mr Cedric Tan
Hon. Treasurer - Mrs Helen Tam
Asst. Hon. Treasurer - Mdm Patricia Teh

Members

Mr Teh Beng Boon
Mr Chua Leng Kee
Mr Ee Hock Chuan
Mr Lee Cheng Yan
Mrs Doris Lee
Mdm Quay Leng Neo

Auditors

Mr Tay Hoon Lim
Mrs Anne Yuen

Trustees

Dato Yeo Hock Siew
Mr Lee Cheng Yan
Mdm Stephanie Chong Mei Lin

For more information, please email peranakan_kl@yahoo.com.my.



LEARNING JOURNEYS

CHIJ Our Lady of Good Counsel (OLGC) contributes to Peranakan heritage.

By Maureen Ching, teacher

Our National Education Gallery was set up by a group of teachers with the intention of educating our pupils about the diversity of the different cultures and races in Singapore. The gallery was opened on 1 August 2008 by Mr S Iswaran, Senior Minister of State for Trade & Industry, at the official opening of our new school building.

The Gallery features Chinese and Indian shop houses, reminiscent of different scenes of old Singapore, the Eurasian culture and an old Malay kampong house that is a rarity in Singapore. The highlight is the Peranakan Heritage Corner.

Our Peranakan corner is important as it offers an opportunity for the school to highlight a culture that is truly unique to Singapore's heritage. Intricate Peranakan display cupboards and a dressing table adorn the main area. Porcelain, clothes and accessories such as *kasot manek*



Students and teachers at the gallery opening officiated by Minister S Iswaran. Maureen is third from left, in the orange kebaya.

(beaded slippers) are also featured. Most of the items displayed are contributions from the staff and well wishers of the school.

The Gallery will also serve as a 'Learning Journeys' of sorts to conduct story-telling sessions and lessons that integrate subjects such as Social Studies, English, Mother-Tongue, Art & Craft. Pupils can play traditional games here. ❖

Anyone interested to learn more can email chijolgc@moe.edu.sg

SEMAYANG ABU AT TAN TOCK SENG'S 210TH BIRTHDAY: THE SECOND REUNION

19 – 25 July, 2009 • Singapore and Malacca

An informal gathering initiated by 5th generation descendant Juliet Ong in 2002 led to the first family reunion of the Tan Tock Seng clan in September 2005. Three years after, 150 descendants came together for the week-long second reunion. Melbourne-based 5th generation Baba **David Neo** reports.

This was my first Tan Tock Seng (TTS) reunion. I knew that my great-great-grandmother, Tan Tiang Neo, was his daughter because our family had kept her 80th birthday invitation, which indicated the relationship. For years, I tried to find out more, even researching at the National Archives. But the patriarchal nature of Chinese culture revealed no record of the female lineage.

As luck would have it, a friend from Singapore sent me a Straits Times cutting of a Tan Tock Seng reunion after seeing the faded, sepia photograph of Tan Tiang Neo in my living room. I recognised a fellow church-goer, Claudine Chionh (6th generation), in the article. She referred me to Lawrence Tan (6th generation), who works for Scotland Yard in London and runs the TTS website, where I have been blogging for the last three years with my long-lost relatives around the world, most of whom I have never met. Lawrence has been painstakingly constructing the TTS family tree for the last 10 years.

To date there are 1,429 descendants scattered across the world. The reunion brought together a diaspora of descendants from Australia, Hong Kong, the UK, US and Thailand. ❖

“It was fantastic connecting with relatives from all over the world, a feeling of great comfort and affirmation of our heritage and identity. I grew up feeling a loss of identity in KL as I was never accepted by the Chinese, neither was I accepted by the Malays because I was not Muslim; my best friends were Indian girls. I feel I have finally found my identity, finally come home...”

Evelyn Trotter, a museologist and a nonya hanyut (adrift) as her mom describes her, has spent the last 30 years in the US.



The reunion dinner in Malacca.



Semayang abu at the graves of Tan Tock Seng and his son, Tan Kim Ching.



TAN TOCK SENG (1798-1850)

Tan Tock Seng was a Singaporean merchant and philanthropist. Born in Malacca in 1798 to an immigrant Hokkien father and Hokkien Peranakan mother, he rose from humble origins to become one of Singapore's richest men. Most of his wealth came from his real estate speculations with J H Whitehead of Shaw, Whitehead & Co. He owned large tracts of prime land. In 1844, he contributed S\$5,000 to the construction of a hospital on top of Pearl's Hill. The hospital, named after him, was later moved to its present Tan Tock Seng Road as it outgrew its original location.

WELCOME

We welcome our new life members:

1. Mr. Raphael Koh Yew Lee
2. Mdm Lim Bee Lee
3. Mr Lim Chen Sian
4. Mdm Dianna Tok
5. Miss Jackie Yoong Gee Kee

21ST BABA NYONYA CONVENTION MALACCA, 5 – 7 DECEMBER 2008

**"Towards Greater Awareness of our
Baba Nyonya Heritage"**

Package cost: S\$323 - \$350 (twin/triple-sharing) and **S\$438 - \$450 (single)** includes return trip via air-conditioned VIP 26-seater coach with guide service, accommodation at Hotel Equatorial Melaka inclusive of breakfast, Peranakan lunches, convention dinners on Friday and Saturday, seminar, half-day city tour, driver & guide tips and travel insurance.

To avoid any disappointment, please register with Mrs Lim Geok Huay at 6255-0704 or Mr Chan Eng Thai at 6538-8280.

Important: The convention is during the super-peak travel period so please book early.

More details and the form can be downloaded from www.peranakan.org.sg.

圣徒相通

Communion of

ALL SAINTS
FUNERAL SERVICES PTE LTD



DR ERIC YEO, DIRECTOR
HP: 9652 2031

*"At COMMUNION
OF ALL SAINTS, we
are "kindred" in the
deepest sense of the
word. We belong to
the family of God and
share a common
spiritual life with
Christ Jesus."*

WHOLLY OWNED BY DR ERIC YEO

- **SERVICING EXCLUSIVELY ALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES**
- **24-HOUR ONE STOP SERVICE**
- **24-HOUR DOCTOR CERTIFICATION**

24 hours – HP: 9652 2031

127 Lavender Street, Singapore 338735
(Next to Singapore Casket) Tel: 6297 7117

THE PERANAKAN BALL ORGANISING COMMITTEE

Bebe Seet
John Lee
Monica Alsagoff
Sng Geok Huay
Claire Seet
Alvin Yapp
Mabel Long
Emeric Lau
Alan Koh

The Peranakan Ball committee would like to thank all sponsors and everyone who helped out in one way or another to make the 108th Dinner & Dance on 14 November 2008 a big success.

Intercontinental Singapore
Raffles Town Club
ACM- The Peranakan Museum
Beiersdorf Singapore
Chilli Padi Nonya Restaurant
The Blue Ginger Restaurant
Ang Eng Baju Kebaya
Guan Antiques
House of Cheongsam
Asialink House
The Whole Earth Vegetarian Restaurant
Body Contours
Kebayalah!
Asiapac Books
DNA Beauty
True Colours Makeup Cosmetics
Goh Joo Hin
Ms Marilyn Tan
Katong Antique House
Kim Choo Kueh Chang
Kevin Seah Haute Couture
Mr Loh Lik Peng (Majestic Hotel)
Pan Pacific Hotel

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
Email: 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>.



Baba House. This new heritage house at 157 Neil Road opened on 4 September 2008. Go back in time to 1928 and experience what a grand Peranakan row house would have been like. Owned by the Wee family (whose ancestor Wee Bin was a mid-

19th century shipping magnate) since 1910, the house was sold in 2005 to the National University of Singapore and is now run by NUS Museum. Funds for the purchase and restoration were donated by Agnes Tan, in memory of her father Tun Tan Cheng Lock. On the gallery at level 3, A Psychotaxonomy of Home by Hong Kong-based Singapore contemporary artist Michael Lee Hong Hwee, reinterprets with paper cut-outs the symbolism of the flora and fauna and mythical beasts found in a Peranakan house. Baba House, 157 Neil Road, Singapore. Tel: 62275731. Visits are by appointment only.

Free admission. \$10 for guided tours. Please call the house for details.
<http://www.nus.edu.sg/museum/baba/index.html>

Asian Civilisations Museum. Neither East Nor West: Asians in Monochrome, at the Special Exhibitions Gallery until 1 February 2009, showcases a collection of 40 portraits by Lafayette Studio of London belonging to the Islamic Arts Museum, Kuala Lumpur, made from negatives housed at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Also featured are 12 portraits by the studio of G R Lambert, Singapore.



Madame Wellington Koo (photograph courtesy of Asian Civilisations Museum)

Subjects include Madame Wellington Koo, daughter of sugar baron Oei Tiong Ham, and Dr Lim Boon Keng, who was president of the Straits Chinese British Association (former name of The Peranakan Association). Civilisations Museum, 1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555, Tel: 63322982, Opening Hours: 9am to 7pm (Tuesdays to Saturdays), 1pm to 7pm (Mondays), Admission \$8 (adults), \$4 (senior citizens and students). <http://www.acm.org.sg>

National Library. Now on: A fascinating exhibition on level 10 about the people behind Singapore's street names, including biographies, photographs and documents from the Koh Seow Chuan collection, about prominent Peranakans such as Tan Kim Seng and Tan Tock Seng. National Library, 100 Victoria Street, Singapore 188064, Tel: 63323255, Opening Hours: 10am-9pm (Daily), Closed on Public Holidays. <http://www.nl.sg>

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/soa/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.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.