



JANUARY-MARCH 2009  
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# *the peranakan*

*Year of the Ox  
Homage to Hokkien*



# VERY FEW THINGS LAST A LIFETIME.

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The Peranakan Association invites you to join us as a member. Lifetime memberships are offered at a one-time payment of S\$103.00.

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- **Exclusive invitations to Peranakan events.**
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**The Peranakan Association welcomes volunteers in our efforts to continually preserve and promote our unique heritage. Volunteers will have the opportunity to interact with key members of the community and discover more aspects of the culture.**

**Members who are keen to offer their time and expertise are urged to contact our Honourary Secretary, Lim Geok Huay at [geok@peranakan.org.sg](mailto:geok@peranakan.org.sg) to register their interest.**

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2. Minimum age for membership is 18.
3. Please refer to the constitution for more details.



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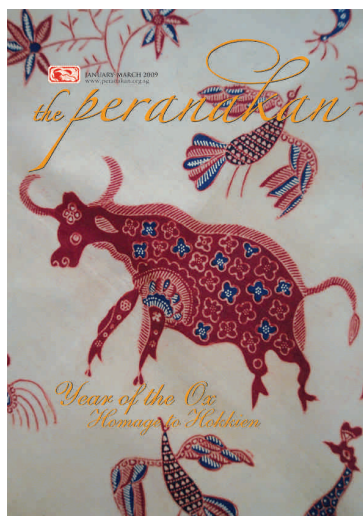
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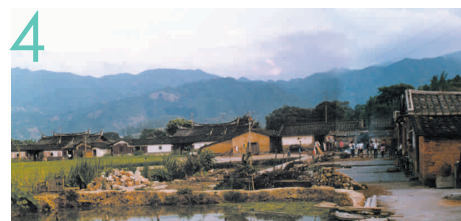
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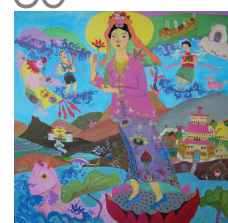


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# HOMAGE TO HOKKIEN

New Year's Day brought me closer to my Hokkien roots. Literally. We landed at Chiang Kai Shek Airport to begin a holiday in Taipei, and to celebrate a happy milestone in my husband Colin's life - his planned early retirement. What was originally a trip to Bangkok had been changed to Taipei because SQ suggested changes to our flights after opposition politics created chaos at Bangkok airport.

Doubts had abounded on our ability to get around Taipei. "Die lah, you two don't know any Mandarin, sure get lost!" laughed a knowing friend. But manage we did, with my scratch of Mandarin and Colin's army Hokkien, which held to the local standards but once in a while went awry, like when he wished the cab driver "Ah hia, jaga ah" (brother, take care ah), after tipping him. For five glorious days we moved about on our own. We saw jaw-dropping treasures at the National Palace Museum, immersed in a Beitou hot spring, and elegantly sipped oolong and pu erh at the teashops. It was so refreshing to speak bits of Hokkien and feel Chinese here and there, to be understood in a language that I was more at ease with than Mandarin, which I had never learnt in school, to my eternal regret. My Hokkien forefathers from the Haideng district of Fujian would have been proud of me, but that's another story which I will keep for a later issue.

As a child, I spoke Hokkien with my dialect-speaking Chinese neighbours, studied Malay in school and spoke Baba Malay at home. It was a disaster for this budding linguist. Syntax and grammar flew out of the window after school. "Mi, gua so balek! Nia ri school juak skali. Masak apa?" (Mummy I'm back! It was very hot in school today. What's cooking?). Hokkien was jumbled with our own brand of romanised Malay. Not surprisingly I scraped through oral Malay at 'O' level. I felt confused and a failure then. I could only manage well in my first language, English. Outside school, I spoke a creole only we Peranakans could understand.

But, I've moved on and coped pretty well, even with largely forgotten Hokkien and pidgin Mandarin. Do I have

a false sense of pride in being able to converse in a unique patois? I think it is more about belonging to a rich, unique culture, a heritage to be proud of, one that Singapore is now waking up to after the huge success of Channel 8's "The Little Nyonya", about which we have an exclusive interview with Mediacorp in this issue. It is a heritage that was also marvelously captured in Main Wayang's refreshingly new musical *Siapa Baba?* that played to full houses late last year, optimising on Republic Polytechnic's high-tech staging.

So we cheer the Hokkien-ness of our patois – the dialect of 35 million overseas Chinese speakers, comprising the largest group of Chinese in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Also known as Holoe in Taiwan and Lanang in the Philippines, Hokkien is the language of migrants from southern China, largely from Fujian which was a vital hub for trade and migration.

In this New Year issue we trace the Hokkien roots of two families, the Lees and the Chias, in articles written by two Babas who had the wonderful opportunity to visit their ancestral hometowns in Fujian. At the same time, one of our website's readers is also seeking help to complete her family's genealogy. Perhaps, our magazine readers may be able to help? Find out also about the distinctions between the patois spoken by Peranakans in Singapore and Malacca, which is predominantly Malay in content, and our Penang compatriots whose *lingua franca* is substantially Hokkien. Of course, the Hokkien theme would not be complete without giving you Hokkien-derived recipes such as *Itek Tim*, *Char Bek* and *Char Ju- Hi*.

Also exclusive to *The Peranakan* is a preview of a new book by poet-writer Baba Robert Yeo, in which we feature recollections of his father's life and passion for billiards. Turn the pages for other articles including sharing our Peranakan food and culture in England, Peranakan art and the quirky world of baba and nyonya mediums.

*Selamat Taon Baru!*

*Linda*

## ■ LETTER ■

One of the best things about my recent trip back to Singapore is that I now have a sudden backlog of two years' issues of *The Peranakan* to read! And what a wonderful task! The beauty of the production and quality of the magazine is truly exceptional. The articles and contents are informative and remind me of many things I have forgotten about our culture, especially since I am *luar negeri*. Well done, everyone!

*Daripada Peranakan Dari Luar Negeri*

Josephine Chia

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Earlier this year two committee members, Monica Alsagoff and Chan Eng Thai, voiced out the main reason for their involvement with The Peranakan Association. "It's for our children." No heritage mission can be more meaningful, clear and inspiring than this.

Through our collective efforts to promote and preserve the Peranakan heritage, by documenting and presenting our past and our history for future generations, it is encouraging that we have an increasingly growing pool of volunteer enthusiasts who have stepped forward to further this mission.

Over the years the Association has been successful in keeping Peranakan culture in the limelight, especially with the support and partnership of the National Heritage Board, Singapore Tourism Board and the National University of Singapore. This has placed the Peranakan heritage on a national platform, as something for the future generations not just of our community, but also of our country and region.

The TV series *Little Nonya* has taken interest in Peranakan culture to another level entirely.

Now, more than ever, we need to provide the proper foundations to satisfy this interest, by sharing what we know through events, performances, books, exhibitions and outreach programmes, and to help promote the various Peranakan businesses in Singapore and the region.

At the end of the year we will be hosting a Peranakan Festival and the 22nd Baba Convention. We have exciting plans ahead and our committee will be working hard to showcase the heritage to the public and to delegates from the region in new and inspiring ways. It will be a year of strengthening networks at home and abroad, of increasing our membership numbers to give more weight to our mission and reach, and to continue to find new ways to present ourselves in order to make the heritage relevant in an ever-changing world.

I wish all our members and our readers a Happy New Year and *Selamat Taon Baru!*

*Lee Kip Lee*

*President*

*The Peranakan Association, Singapore*



# OF BOHEA AND BAKOL SIAH

Memories of a Baba's visit to the land of his ancestors

By Peter Lee

Going back to my ancestral village has strangely become a once-in-a-decade occurrence. I first returned to the county town of Yongchun (H. Eng Choon), in the province of Fujian, in the summer of 1986, when I was an exchange student in Beijing's Foreign Languages Institute. \* This one-year sojourn was part of my degree course in Chinese Studies at the London University's School of Oriental & African Studies, and I was apparently the first Singapore student to be granted a visa after Singapore re-established diplomatic relations with China.

Despite the fact that Deng Xiaoping had already opened China's doors, the country, especially the capital city, was still physically very much a Maoist vision — everyone was still dressed in Mao suits, bicycles ruled the roads, Beijing was a vast expanse of characterless mid-century concrete edifices. It was the end of my one-year stint at the Institute in China and I had the summer to tour the vast country. I had a tight, ambitious schedule to travel the length and breadth of China, but was determined to fulfill a dream of finding my ancestral village. I set aside just a few days to do this, and was not confident of any success. After all, my ancestor had left China centuries ago and although my grandfather had been communicating with our relatives there before the War, that was still over forty years ago.

Armed with photocopies of pre-War letters from relatives in Yongchun (my father had kept all these old documents from my grandfather's time), I flew to Xiamen (H. Amoy) in a brand new Boeing 737 on 11 June 1986. Air travel was relatively inexpensive for a foreign student, and was still restricted to foreigners and high-ranking cadres. Flying etiquette was not something local passengers were used to. I remember there was a stampede to board the plane although we all had reserved seats.

\* Most of the place names and personal names are spelt according to the Hanyu pinyin system. Where they are spelt in Minnan dialect, the equivalent in Mandarin is provided in parenthesis, and indicated by the letter M. The Minnan equivalent is indicated by the letter H. in parenthesis.

Mid-air, a friendly comrade seated next to me disparaged the limpid tea served on board, then offered me some of his own from a small thermos, but not before grabbing my steaming cup and pouring its contents on the floor! During the two-and-a-half-hour flight I could barely contain my excitement. I was finally heading for Fujian, the mythical nexus of the Chinese diaspora, which had been disgorging merchants, sea captains, coolies, adventurers and scholars out to the rest of the world for over a thousand years! Marco Polo's Zayton, a bustling cosmopolitan port, is believed to have been Fujian's port of Quanzhou. The Min river divides the province into two important dialect groups — those to the south ('Minnan', centred on Xiamen) and north ('Minbei', centred on Fuzhou) of the river.

As an undergraduate in London, I was fascinated to learn that Fujian was the centre of scholarly book printing in the Song dynasty, and that the dialects of Fujian preserve the sounds of ancient Chinese Tang poems which rhyme better in the Fujian dialect than in the 'younger' Mandarin spoken today. The Japanese pronunciation of Chinese words was also apparently heavily influenced by the Fujian dialect, owing to the massive trading links. Its ancient infiltration to the languages of



View of Gulangyu from Xiamen.



Yongchun at dusk.

Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, among others, is also well documented.

The word tea, its French version *thé* as well as the Malay *teh*, owe their origins to the Hokkien *teh*. The most well known tea came from the Wuyi mountains in the northwestern border of Fujian, known in the West by its Fujian pronunciation — bohea tea. And it was none other than bohea tea that was tossed into the waters of Boston harbour in December 1773. Who would have thought Fujian had a role in American Independence?

In art, the famed Dehua kilns produced the finest white glazed wares and ceramic figurines. The Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore has an outstanding collection of these wares, which were donated by Mrs Pamela Hickley (a member of our Association, I am proud to say). The

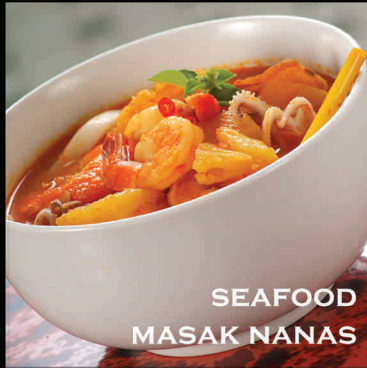


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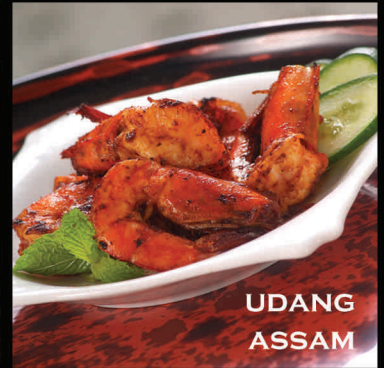
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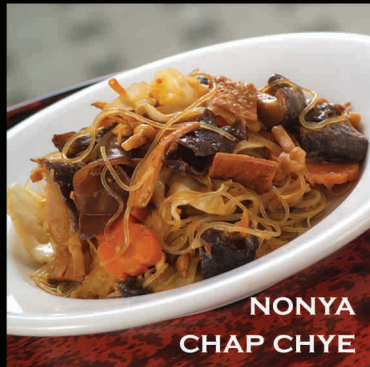
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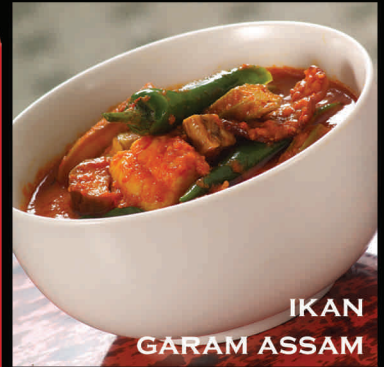
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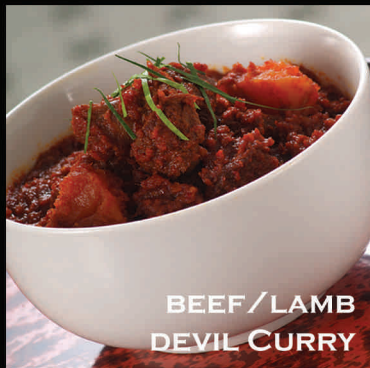
UDANG  
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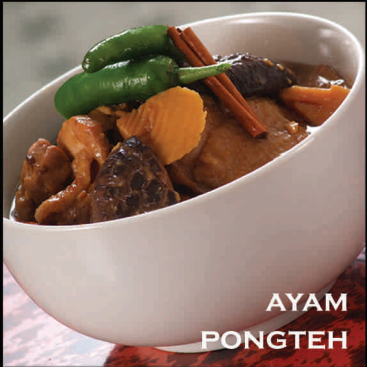
BEEF/LAMB  
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Zhengzhou kilns also produced the famed 'Swatow' wares, one of the most interesting and underrated category of Chinese ceramics. Fujian was also the centre of fine lacquered basketry, and rare examples from the 17th century can be found in the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

What was most fascinating to me, however, was Fujian's history as the ancient conduit of foreign trade, and its reputation as a 'pirate's lair' whenever foreign trade was banned (all merchants trading under a ban then became 'pirates'), and as the centre of resistance to the Manchus under a pirate leader Zheng Chenggong, known to the West as Koxinga. This was the history and origins of the Chinese Peranakan and mestizo communities in South-east Asia. Up till today, people of Fujian ancestry continue to play a major part in the social, political, commercial and artistic life of many South-east Asian countries.

The queue at Xiamen airport's passport counter brought me back down to earth and straight back home. It was long and slow, and in frustration, someone behind me uttered the infamous 'k\*\*\*bu' (a threat to do something unspeakable to someone's mother), heard daily in any Singapore army camp or *kopitiam*. Yes I was certainly back in the Fujian heartland.

Driving towards the city, I was pleasantly surprised by the balmy, tropical air and shabby colonial charm of the city, with its shop-houses and villas that returning Chinese from Malaya and Indonesia had built in the early 20th century. Xiamen seemed like a Mediterranean port town, or a little Lisbon in the East. Designated a treaty port in 1842 after China's humiliating defeat in the First

Opium War, the city, like Shanghai and Hong Kong, was influenced by colonial architecture, especially on Gulangyu, a small island off Xiamen where all the consulates were established. Nothing could be more different from the dusty aridity of Beijing.

Overseas investment from South-east Asia was beginning to trickle into the city, and a few new gleaming hotels covered in sheets of glass had already opened its doors. As a student on a budget I opted for the old state-run Huaqiao hotel, but it was full. The receptionist kindly offered me a bed in a dormitory. I was too tired to look for another hotel and accepted the offer. A grave mistake... the room was unoccupied except for a stranger on another single bed and his 'lady friend' with whom he shared it, whispering to each other all night. It was not the couple who kept me awake however, but restless rats that scuttled across the room in the middle of the night. One, I clearly remember, climbed onto my blanket and perched itself on the summit of my toes.

I moved to another hotel the next day and toured the city. The following morning I took a bus ride to this small town where my ancestors came from. Yongchun is 160 km northwest from Xiamen, in the heart of a tea-producing area and also the centre for fine lacquered baskets, the famed *bakol siah* of the Peranakans. From the family documents I knew that the first ancestor of our family to leave China was born in an area called Dalu Tou (Tualo Tau 'the corner of the main street'). His name was Lee Kan (M. Li Kan), and as my grandmother always told me with a twinkle in her eye, he was a pirate. I am of the seventh generation, and up to my grandfather's time, funds were still being remitted to our impoverished relatives in the village.

The rickety, rusty bus, filled with people, livestock and farm produce, weaved its way out of the city into the hills and valleys of the hinterland. What was supposed to be a five hour journey became almost 12, as the bus broke down countless times. It was the height of summer and the mosquitoes were out in full force. I made the mistake of wearing shorts. But the journey was breathtaking, through cloud kissed hills and mountains, the heart of Fujian's famed oolong tea production. It was not till dusk that I arrived, at a picturesque town on the banks of a river, with mountains

visible in the distance. I walked into the nearest hotel; China had not long before opened its doors to tourism but any yuan for infrastructure certainly had not reached this town, whose only inn was a communist-style concrete bunker. Thankfully it had a room for me, which although spartan, had one important luxury — a mosquito net.

I woke up the next morning with that unsettling feeling of not really knowing what to do. Wandering the corridors of



Mr Yan, my helpful guide and host.

the ground floor of the inn, I stumbled upon a small, smoke-filled office, with a few elderly gentlemen sipping tea and puffing cigarettes in the midst of animated conversation. The small sign outside was serendipitous: "The Overseas Chinese Liaison Office". I introduced myself and explained my mission. The group got very excited, especially when I showed them the photocopies I had brought. They recognised some of the names in the letters. After some consultation and phone calls, I was told to return in the late afternoon, when they would arrange to help me locate the family house.

Yongchun could not have been all that backward because a new minibus somehow appeared at the appointed time. Mr Yan, a friendly and helpful middle-aged associate in the office, volunteered to guide me around the county, warning, however, that I should pose as a 'researcher'. He said things would become difficult once news got round that someone was in town to look for long-lost relatives — we would be thronged by claimants and





*The Lee clan complex in Dalu Tou, Yongchun.*

endless pleas for refrigerators and televisions!

After several enquiries in different neighbourhoods, we managed to locate a Lee clan house in the Dalu Tou area. Just off a country road, it was a complex of traditional Fujian courtyard houses with their sturdy brick walls, curved rooflines and ornately carved wooden screens and beams at the entrance, which was next to a large pond. The house had definitely known better days, like an old dowager, the beauty of her day, fallen on hard times. Stacks of hay and disorderly clusters of farm tools blocked the peeling, faded carvings. It was hard to imagine I was standing before an ancestral hall, announced by a forlorn plaque above the doorway.

But the setting was breathtaking — gentle rooflines, rippling into the background, enveloped by the soft velvet hills of tea. Mr Yan began speaking with some villagers and within minutes a crowd had formed. Steaming hot oolong was brought out, as well as rough benches. The sun was beginning to dip behind the hills, and I began to worry that I had not much time.

A portly village elder with short cropped hair soon appeared bearing an old dog-eared book: the genealogical

records of the Lee clan of Talu Tou! My heart was pounding with excitement. He seemed to speak an old rustic kind of Minnan dialect, which I did not understand. Pulling me by his side, he pointed at the charts, proceeding from generation to generation. Ever since I was a child my grandmother would be asked to recite the generational order of our ancestors to me in Minnan pronunciation: there was Lee Kan, then Lee Chan Bee, Lee Quee Lim, Lee Keng Kiat, Lee Chim Huk, then my father Lee Kip Lee. I could not believe my ears when, between what to me was Hokkien gibberish, I heard the same names... "Lee Kan... Lee Chan Bee... Lee Quee Lim..." and saw the Chinese characters of the names so familiar to me.

I knew then and there that I was home.

When he heard me repeat the names, his eyes twinkled with pleasure. He suddenly mentioned the name Lee Cheng Yan (M. Li Qingyuan). I nodded enthusiastically. Lee Cheng Yan was a grandson of Lee Kan, a pioneering Malacca and Singapore businessman and philanthropist, and father of Lee Choon Guan (M. Li Junyuan). He led me to a room behind the ancestral shrine and showed me a large wooden



*One of the houses within the Lee clan complex.*



*A glimpse into the ancestral hall in the Lee clan complex.*





The 1902 plaque dedicated to Lee Cheng Yan inscribed with the phrase *Zhong Mai Hong Gao* ('Loyalty Strides with Greatness and Loftiness').



Detail of the fine but faded carvings in the façade of one of the houses.

plaque with carved Chinese characters decorated with gold leaf, only traces of which were still discernible. The old man proudly explained that it was presented to Lee Cheng Yan on his conferment of an imperial rank during the reign the Guangxu Emperor. The plaque was in bad condition: the lacquer had almost all flaked off and insects had evidently been making a meal of it.

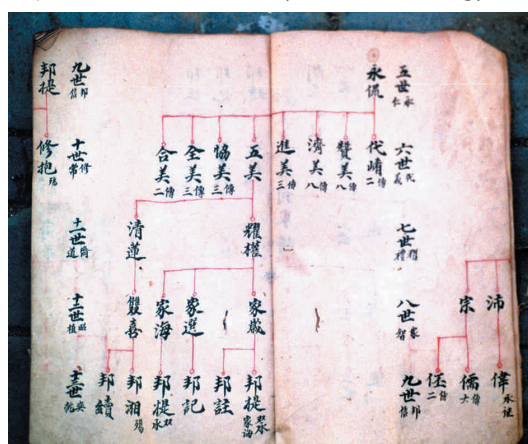
He murmured something solemnly, which Mr Yan explained, revealed that he had, at the risk of severe punishment, kept these family heirlooms by carefully burying them in a secret place during the Cultural Revolution. If not for this man, the history of my family would have been lost forever. Sadly I never managed to know his name and I never saw him again.

The sun had dipped further below the hills and I had not much sunlight left. I had not expected to discover much on this trip and had forgotten to take extra rolls of film. Having taken many pictures of the countryside, I just had a few frames left for the wooden plaque and the ancestral book. The follies of a disorganised youth! And there was no photocopy machine in the whole of Yongchun at that time! I dashed back into town and returned to photograph the rest of the book.

What did this precious tome reveal? The Lee family moved into Yongchun in the early 17th century from somewhere else in Fujian that I could not ascertain. Lee Kan (M. Li Kan) also known as Lee Eng Kan (M. Li Yongkan) and Lee Toon Hong (M. Li Dunhong) was of the 5th generation. His eldest brother Lee Choon (M. Li Chun) seems to have been the first member of the family to catch the travel bug. The ancestral book records that he died in 'Kalapa' (M. Jialaba), one of the old names for Batavia and that his wife had a rather strange name, suggesting perhaps she was not Chinese.

Lee Kan the third of five brothers himself left Yongchun for Malacca in 1778 at the age of 18, against his family's advice, and over the years became a wealthy man, and the patriarch of a prominent Malacca family. By 1795 he is recorded in a Malacca inscription in the Sam Poh (M. Sanbao) temple as being a director of the Haiguan Gongs, the customs farm headed by the presiding Kapitan China, Chua Soo Cheong (M. Cai Suchang). He left his fortune to his Malacca-born

wife Tan Tuan Neo, with whom he had one son and three daughters, and returned to China, where he lived to a ripe old age (84) with another seven sons and four daughters by two concubines. Most of the sons by his China-born wife were imperial scholars, while his Malacca-born son remained a businessman. As for Lee Kan's Malacca-born wife, no other information was given except for her ancestral village, Fengshan dou (H. Pangsuh Tau). It took me twenty years to discover who she was.



A page from the ancestral book, showing a chart with some of the descendants of Lee Kan.

But on that trip I barely had any time to decipher all that information. Kindly Mr Yan came to the hotel in the evening with his wife, bearing gifts, and I was glad to have had the presence of mind to have bought him a gift earlier — a carton of cigarettes! I rushed back to Xiamen the next morning, and checked into one of the newer hotels. I felt I deserved it after suffering the summer mosquitoes. The first thing I did was to call my father to tell him the good news. He was always enormously proud of his Baba son, learning Chinese and finding his ancestral roots. Decades later, I would still be remembered by his friends as 'the one who went back to China.' ❖

**In Part 2 — What else the ancestral book revealed, then a second journey in 1996, and a third trip in 2007 with the descendants of Tan Kim Seng in a quest to discover the Tan ancestral house.**



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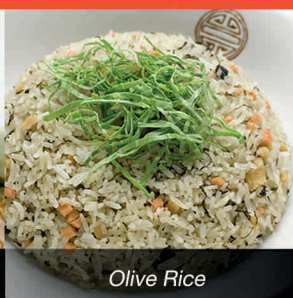
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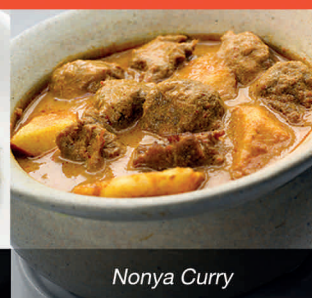
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# A JOURNEY INTO THE PAST

*Chia Hock Jin shares the experience of discovering his ancestral village*

**C**an a fifth-generation Singapore Peranakan find his roots in China? I have returned from an amazingly successful visit to Tong An in Fujian and can say yes!

It all started about 20 years ago with my daughter asking me if I knew where we had come from. I said I had posed the same question to my father and grandfather, and both did not know. I was surprised when she said she knew. Her generation had learnt Mandarin in school and she had come across old family papers where my great-grandfather had written down the name of our ancestral village in China which was Quanzhou, Tong An, Black Scholars' Bridge (Or Si Kio), in front of the ancestral hall or *rumah abu*.

Since then, I have pored over any available material and followed up all possible leads. But my enquiries drew a blank. It was disappointingly frustrating, but I never gave up the idea of finding my ancestral place of origin. I had a vague notion that Tong An was agricultural, and people had to eke out an existence amidst poor soil conditions.

My breakthrough came via Helen Chua, a recent acquaintance. Helen's husband knew the Chia Association in Tong An, and from his enquiries, determined that Or Si Kio is currently known as Chit Li Khao (Hokkien for Seventh Mile Entrance). He also discovered that a large Chia clan resides there.

I was initially sceptical. Part of my reticence was due to self-doubt, as I speak only broken Hokkien and am illiterate in Mandarin.

Still, the attraction and excitement of a treasure hunt was too tempting to resist. My great-great-grandfather was Chia Leong Chuan, whose details are captured in Song Ong Siang's *One Hundred Years History of the Chinese in Singapore*. He was head honcho at the Mercantile Bank, which was subsequently acquired by HSBC in the 1960s. His more illustrious son was Chia Hood Theam. My grandfather was Chia Keng Chin and my father Chia Boon Swee, all employed at the Mercantile Bank at one time or another. I once asked my grandfather who Chia Leong Chuan's father was, and he said that if his memory held, it was Chia Kay Tuan, who was likely to have arrived in Singapore in the 1840s.

Fortunately, we could provide the Chinese characters to these names. Within days, news returned that the "Keng" in my grandfather's name matched those of a generation

at Chit Li Khao. Moreover, the Chias in Tong An were excited about the possibility of a meeting. My fifth cousins there were already arranging a briefing at the Chia Clan Association, a visit to Chit Li Khao and lunch. By then, it was quite impossible to deny that I had found my ancestral village, and so I fixed 3 November 2007 as the date of my visit to Fujian.

All feelings of uneasiness were erased the moment I landed at Xiamen Airport. There are many places of interest, including the ancient city of Quanzhou, which is covered in Marco Polo's writings, and Xiamen University, a magnificent, sprawling campus founded by Tan Kah Kee, with Dr Lim Boon Keng as its first Vice-Chancellor. Xiamen is a modern city, offering all the amenities urban-bred Singaporeans require. It has good hotels, good shopping

and is linked by an excellent network of highways, making the journey to Tong An a mere 40-minute drive.

Tong An county remains basically agricultural although industry, especially from Taiwan, has been gradually developing. It abounds in granite and natural construction materials, which also means that the soil is thin and erosion common. It was just such poor soil conditions that pushed its inhabitants to look to commerce and emigration for their livelihood.

Our first stop was the Chia Association. Photos of ancient Chia scholars and generals adorned the walls of the

Association, which has a website, [www.xmbaoshu.com](http://www.xmbaoshu.com), should readers wish to contact them. Heading the Secretariat is Ms Xie Xiu Mei, a very helpful and resourceful official. I was



*Hock Jin at the Chia Association.*



*Hock Jin and his cousins in Tong An.*





Or Si Kio.



Or Si Kio surroundings.

introduced to three of my fifth cousins, who would show me around Or Si Kio.

Ten minutes from Tong An, my fifth cousin announced that we had arrived at our ancestral village. I was bewildered, for there was nothing much to see, other than cultivated land. Then my fifth cousin pointed to a small, insignificant bridge. It required some prompting from my cousins before I realized that this was Or Si Kio, a granite structure spanning a rivulet and connecting two ends of a footpath. But, my cousins hastily added, this used to be a crucial communications route, linking Xiamen to Beijing. We had to place ourselves in the context of China 200 years ago, when walking and the occasional sedan chair were the chief means of transport. Modernisation had rendered Or Si Kio obsolete. A new roadway built in the mid-20th century and now an expressway even further afield had removed its importance. It was no longer regarded as a landmark and the locality's name was changed to the mundane Chit Li Khao. Small wonder 20 years of searching had failed to locate the village on modern-day maps!

Using Or Si Kio as a reference point, my cousins pointed out the site of the Chia *rumah abu* and I noted that my great-grandfather was very precise when he said it was in front of the bridge. As we surveyed the natural surroundings, my cousins taught me a rhyme that best describes what we saw:

Swa keh Chit Li Khao	Sandy stretch at 7th Mile entrance
Boh hong swa aye chow	No wind but the sand can disappear
Cheng huan tse	Cultivate sweet potatoes
Buay choon theen	the tendrils won't spread out
Cheng hua seng	Cultivate ground nuts
Buay seh jin	they bear no seeds

We drove into the village and suddenly, fire crackers started exploding all around as we passed through its gateway. There were even "rockets" shooting skywards, reminiscent of Chinese New Year in Singapore in the 1950s. Clearly, my impending village visit had set the Chia clan in an exuberant mood. My three cousins introduced us to the other Chias who were by now gathering at the *rumah abu*. We made a diversion to visit the graveyard of the founder of the



Hock Jin meets an elderly relative.



Graveyard of the village founder.



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Chias assembled at their rumah abu.



Tea at the community hall.

village, a Chia, but sadly, nobody could ascertain where he came from or when he died.

By now, there was quite a gathering of Chias at the *rumah abu* and more were still arriving. Unlike my three cousins who were sophisticated and no longer living in the village, the people streaming in were simpler folk, reflecting their agrarian nature. Befitting the environment, the houses were mainly constructed of granite, resembling the rubble walls we see along the boundaries of some Singapore houses. There were doorways but hardly any doors, and genial *kampung spirit* evident everywhere. I was told that the granite buildings were more recent with the accessibility of modern stone cutting equipment. Otherwise, the houses were generally of wood with the same, simple architecture.

An old lady came forward, half-jested that we must be long lost relatives and invited me to her house, which I gladly accepted. The walk through narrow alleys with doorways leading to some home or other was interesting. But the area was drab, with each granite house looking identical to its neighbour. A peep through each doorway showed the same simple furniture – a wooden table with some stools or plastic chairs. This must have been how my ancestors had lived in this village. We finally came to the old lady's home where she invited us to join her son and daughter-in-law for lunch. The meal was simple: porridge, some vegetables and bean sprouts. I was tempted to accept the invitation, but my cousin intervened, saying we had an important lunch

at the Clan Association. I was impressed at the spontaneous gesture of goodwill, and even more impressed when the old lady refused a red packet I had offered her.

We were then brought to a kind of community hall opposite the *rumah abu*, where I was served together with a group of the more elderly men and women. Many were vegetable farmers, although some of their children had left for the city to pursue their business interests. From the conversation, I gathered that there were about 500 people in the village. Of the Chias, only two families had migrated; one to Singapore (which was ours) with whom they had lost all contact, and another to Taiwan where they lost contact after 1949, when the Communists took over the mainland.

As I spoke in broken Hokkien, and also because of the retiring and elderly audience, not much else in the way of conversation transpired. The old folks gestured their appreciation by continually waving their teacups, clasped between two hands. I reciprocated accordingly. I was glad when it was time to leave for lunch at Tong An. Surely there must be younger people to speak to, and this must be the target of my next visit.

Having located my roots, my only regret was the cursory nature of the visit. My next trip would have to be better planned, with at least a Mandarin and Hokkien-speaking relative to communicate with our Tong An relatives. I hope to go there again within the next few years. ❖



A typical village home.



Lunch at Tong An.



# DISTINCTLY PERANAKAN HOKKIEN

By Lim Beng Soon

**T**he language of the Peranakans in the former Straits Settlements of Singapore, Malacca and Penang can be viewed as basically two distinct branches.

These two varieties of the Peranakan patois can be classified into the Baba Malay spoken in Singapore and Malacca, and the Peranakan Hokkien spoken in Penang. I will start with a brief definition and a copious word list of borrowed Malay terms present in Penang Peranakan Hokkien today – a feature that sets Penang Peranakan Hokkien apart from the Hokkien used throughout the Malay Peninsula.

The Peranakan Hokkien spoken amongst the Babas of Penang has an inverse proportion of Malay and Hokkien words compared to Baba Malay, which is essentially a Malay patois with some Hokkien terms. Peranakan Hokkien as its name suggests is basically Hokkien with a strong Malay slant in terms of borrowed Malay words and expressions.

Since the underlying syntax of Penang Hokkien is Hokkien, it is not surprising that the borrowed Malay words have been inflected with the Hokkien hi-lo intonation in speech.

Many household articles or nouns related to household chores are referred to in Malay. For example, *baleh* for bench, *bangku* for stool and children sit on *buai-buai* for a swing. In the kitchen, bottles are referred to as *botol*, bottle corks as *butut*, the stone for grinding spices as *giling rumpah*, a big steel mug as *kole*, plates as *piring*, and the pestle as *tumbuk*. The Malay term for bolsters or *puluk*, mattress or *tilam*, and the cotton within these as *kapok* have also been adopted wholesale.

Furthermore, there is a high incidence of the use of Malay to describe articles of dress and fashion of the Peranakans. For example, the nyonyas have taken up the use of *baju* to mean a lady's short blouse, *kasut manek* for beaded shoes or slippers, and *sanggol* for the

typical nyonya hairstyle of braiding one's hair into a bun. On the other hand, the Babas have *sepatu* for shoes. Both Peranakan men and women use the *sarong* while the loin cloth is referred to as *chawat*.

They have also taken on many Malay preferences for certain toiletries such as using *bedak sejuk* or rice powder to keep themselves comfortably cool in the hot tropics, and *bedak* for powder. To the Peranakans, the Malay word *jamban* is used for the water closet, or toilet, *sabun* is used for soap, *timba* for pail, and *tuala* for towel. The fence around the house is referred to as the *pagar*, and if the house is located within the town, then the frontal half door is called the *pintu pagar*, while the drain around and in the house is the *longkang*.

Both Baba Malay and Penang Hokkien have proven their ability to adapt to an ever changing environment by borrowing for expediciencies of communication. This ability to absorb and modify whatever that is useful in the Peranakan's psyche can be seen in how enthusiastically the Peranakans have taken to modern innovations. Some of the many English words that have found their way into Penang Hokkien include motorcar, office, bank and gown.

The language of the Peranakans is indeed distinct from that of the two dominant communities from which they originate, namely that of Malay and Hokkien. Baba Malay and Penang Hokkien have grown organically since the early days when Malacca, Singapore and Penang were British outposts and were haven to the immigrant Fujian Chinese businessman and his local wife.

As an elderly Baba once remarked, BABA could stand for "Borrow, Adapt, Better, Adopt". Indeed the language of the Peranakans reflects how an immigrant society can adapt itself (through adoption of appropriate culture and language) to alien

surroundings and flourish both linguistically and culturally. The list below forms part of an ongoing collection of Malay words used in Penang Hokkien and Baba Malay. It might be interesting to note that many of the Malay words actually stem from Bahasa Indonesia as opposed to Bahasa Malay. Evidence of this can be seen in the use of words like *senduk*, *bantai*, *gulai* and *kongkiak* which although understandable to the Malays are not commonly used.

(This article is an excerpt of the original which first appeared in *Suara Baba* in November 2002.)

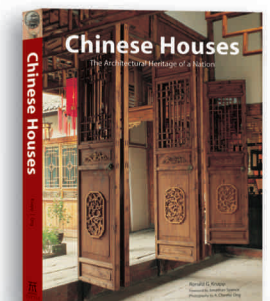
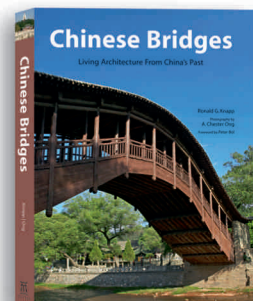
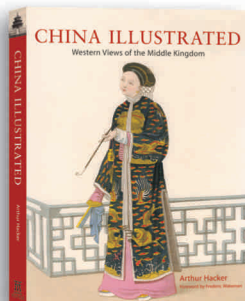
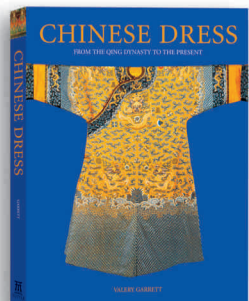
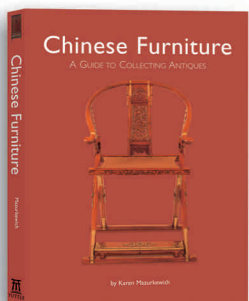
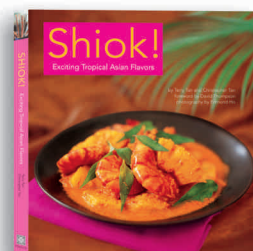
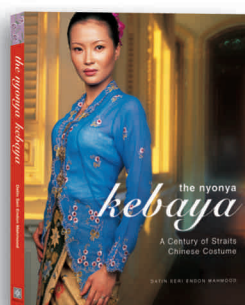
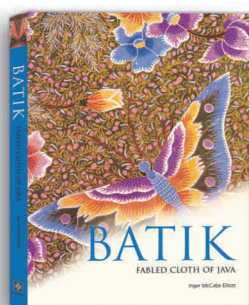
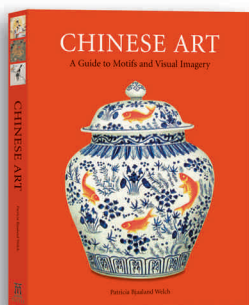
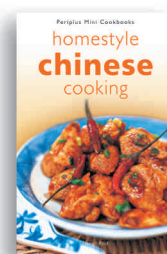
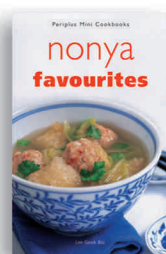
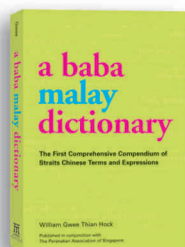
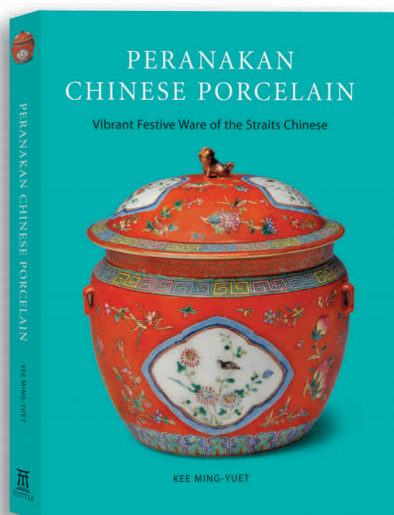
## Some common Malay words in Peranakan usage

- (h)abok – dust
- abu – ash
- adek-alek – younger siblings
- akai – idea (cf **akal** in Malay)
- asap – to offer incense
- baju – lady's dress
- bakuli – (cf **buah guli** in Malay) – marbles
- balai – police station
- baleh – bench
- bangku – stool
- bangsa – race / ethnic origin
- bangsan – market (cf **bangsar** in Malay)
- bangsat – a derogatory term for a disliked person
- barang-barang – things
- batang – a stem or stemlike thing
- batu – stone
- batu giling – stone used for grinding spices
- batu lesung – pestle
- bayang-bayang – shadows
- bedak – powder
- bedak-sejuk – rice powder
- belangkai – a type of dice game (cf **belangkas** in Malay)
- bidan – midwife
- biji – seed
- bintang – star
- buah – fruit
- buai-buai – a swing (cf **buai** in Malay)
- bunga melor – jasmine flower
- butut – cork

(cont'd on page 17)



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# PENANG HOKKIEN NOSTALGIA

by Colin Chee

(from page 14)

chawat – a loin cloth

churut – cigar

gaji – pay, wages

gambit – gambier

getah – sap of fruits / rubber

hakim – judge

hamba – slave

jamban – toilet

kacip – betel nut cracker

kapok – cotton (cf **kapas** in Malay)

kapok – lime

kasut – ladies' shoes

kasut manek – beaded slippers and shoes

kasut kodok – a type of beaded shoes

ketam batu – (as an idiom, a stingy person)

kole – a big steel mug

kunduri – a feast (cf **kenduri** in Malay)

lalang – wild grass

lampeng – diapers (cf **lampin** in Malay)

lili – the veins of the palm leaf (cf **lidi** in Malay)

longkang – drain

manek – beads

orang gaji – servant, maid

pagar – fence

pintu pagar – half door in front of town houses

piring – plates, saucers

puluk – bolster (cf **peluk** in Malay 'to embrace')

rokok-chau – tobacco (**chau** in Hokkien means 'grass')

sabun – soap

sampah – rubbish

sanggoi – bun of hair of a lady (cf **sanggul** in Malay)

sarong – a Malay garment tucked around the waist

senduk – spoon/ladle

sepatu – shoes

sireh – betel nut leaf

sulam – embroidery

tali – string/rope

tangkai – amulet

tembok – wall

timba – pail

tuala – towel

tumbuk – pestle

I remember vividly the last time I heard this sing-song lilting dialect spoken.

It was some 30 years ago when a very good friend and colleague at DBS Bank, then known as The Development Bank of Singapore, called his mum at home in Penang. The words and phrases were familiar, but the way they were enunciated and their cadence caught me off-guard. It left me trying to place the accent.

"It's Penang Hokkien, lah," Beng Kwee said. "We speak it differently from Singaporeans."

While I was reviewing the new Penang Hokkien dictionary a few nights ago, a visiting friend from Kuala Lumpur offered, "It is refined Hokkien that can be heard on Penang Island and all the way down to Taiping."

"As we go further south," he observed, "it loses more and more of its tones and lilt. It gets more staccato. By the time we get to Singapore, the intonations are matter-of-fact to the point of *chor-lor* (coarseness)." I don't know if he was trying to tell me something.

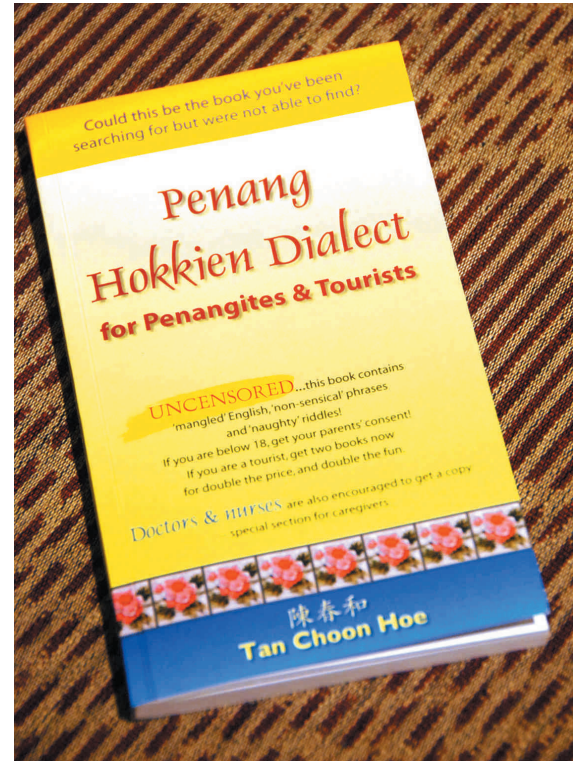
It is hard to explain the allure of Penang Hokkien in print. You have to hear it to be charmed, as though by a gentle sea breeze at Batu Ferringhi beach.

While it is definitely not Peranakan patois, it looks to be sharing the same fate as our mother tongue. As author Tan Choon Hoe notes in his book, *Penang Hokkien Dialect for Penangites & Tourists*, "In the last 10 years or so, there are emerging signs that Penang Hokkien Dialect (PHD) is moving towards the direction of becoming an 'endangered' dialect. More parents are conversing with their children in either Mandarin or English, and the Penang Hokkien dialect is only used in conversations between grandchildren and grandparents."

It is a charming little book. Reading it brings back memories of Penang *assam laksa*, fruit *rojak* with its thick powerful *heh kor*, and *char kway teow*.

Here is a sampling of the gems to be found in Choon Hoe's booklet:

- *Huan choo* (Sweet potato): a corpse (slang used by touts and undertakers to refer to corpses).
- *Boh hoo, hair poon hoe* (No fish, prawns also good): If you can't have the best, second best will do.
- *Cha ching, teoh abu* (Worm, had ashes): Cannot sit still.
- *Chiak pa, eoh kha* (Eat full, shake legs): Not working, leading a comfortable life. ❖



*Penang Hokkien Dialect* is printed by Juta Print, Penang, Malaysia



# CHIAK PAH BOAY? (HAVE YOU EATEN? SUDA MAKAN?)

*Hokkien influences in Peranakan cooking*

By Noreen Chan



*Itek tim.*

As previous Dalam Dapor articles have shown, many Peranakan families here can trace their roots back to southern China, especially Fujian. It is no surprise that many of our traditional practices, from the way we address our elders, to the food we eat, carry strong Hokkien influences. Our patois is peppered with Hokkien, producing hybrid terms like *tok panjang* (*tok* meaning table in Hokkien and *panjang* meaning long in Malay), or, as I once heard a priest say during Good Friday mass in St Peter's Church in Melaka, "Tolong kwee" (please kneel).

Having grown up in a non-Chinese speaking household (except for some very broken Cantonese picked up from my amahs), I did not know for a long time I was using Hokkien terms! At the market, I learnt to identify fish by their Malay names – to this day I do not know what *ikan terubok* is called in English – but cuts of pork were often referred to in dialect. Yet for ages I did not realise that *samchian bak* literally meant 'three-tier pork', referring to the layers of meat and fat that make up belly pork. I had to first learn Mandarin, then use that to bridge Hokkien and English/Malay.

*Dalam Dapor* has previously featured a number of Hokkien-derived Peranakan dishes, including *kueh chang babi* (or *bak chang*) and *chap chye*. While their names reveal their origins, they have distinctive features that identify them as belonging to nyonya cuisine, for example the egg and wheat flour skins (as opposed to plain rice flour) that wrap a

Peranakan-style popiah.

We happily 'mix and match' our dishes and probably do not think about where they have come from. But almost any meal, especially any large gathering, will surely have Hokkien-inspired dishes on the menu. For example, for our reunion dinner on Lunar New Year's eve, we are likely to have *ngor hiang* (5-spice flavoured minced meat roll), *chap chye* and *hee pio* (fish maw) soup, all very Chinese. They will sit on the table in happy companionship with *sambal timun* and *ayam buah keluak* or curry devil, in the kind of multi-cultural combination that characterises what is best about Peranakan food.

## RECIPES

### **ITEK TIM or KIAM CHAI ARP (Duck with salted vegetable)**

This is a family favourite at any time of year, but we like to have it on the second day of the Lunar New Year, as a contrast to the rich food of previous days. We prepare it on New Year's eve morning, to let it *serap* and develop the satisfying flavours we love so well. It is our practice to eat it as a dish by itself, with toast bread.

This version does not use *asam gelugor*; although some acidity is important to counteract the saltiness. We prefer to have on hand a bowl of freshly squeezed lime juice diluted with a bit of soup stock, in which we throw green chillies broken into pieces. We add the lime juice and green chillies



to our individual portions according to personal taste.

1 whole head of *kiam chai* (preserved salted Chinese mustard greens)

1/2 duck, cut into large pieces

1 pig's foreleg, cut into pieces

1-2 tablespoons brandy

1 thumb-sized piece of ginger, bruised

1 salted plum

1 large white onion, peeled

1/2 tablespoon brandy

Salt to taste

Cut the *kiam chai* into big pieces and soak in water for 45 minutes to one hour, changing the water if necessary. Meanwhile, bring a pot of water to the boil and partially cook the pork and duck pieces, skimming off any scum that floats to the surface; this can take up to 45 minutes. Lift out and rub all over with brandy.

Heat a fresh pot of water and when boiling, add the salted plum, whole onion and pork pieces, simmer for 15-20 minutes, then add the duck pieces and a splash of brandy. Simmer another 15 minutes and add the *kiam chai*. Cook until tender (about 30 minutes). If desired, two quartered tomatoes can be added towards the end of cooking.

#### **CHARBAKE (or CHAR BEK) SINGAPURA**

##### **(Kidney Singapore-style)**

1 lb (450g) pork fillet slice thinly

1 pair pig kidneys (*charbek*), washed thoroughly and cut into 1 1/2 inch squares. Score the surface and soak with a little brandy

##### **Rempah**

2 tbsp pounded garlic

3-inch (8 cm) ginger, shredded fine

4 tablespoons *tauchio* (salted soya bean paste)

In hot oil fry *tauchio*, ginger and garlic until fragrant. Add sliced pork, a little dark black sauce for colour, and water. Bring to boil and simmer until pork is tender. Before serving, bring to boil again, put in kidney squares and lift out quickly when cooked. Garnish with fried garlic or *wan swee* (coriander leaf).

##### **CHAR JU-HI (Stir-fried cuttlefish)**

1 1/2 big or 3 small dried *ju-hi* (cuttlefish), slice thinly and set aside. Place sliced *ju-hi* in a bowl of water with 1 teaspoon vinegar to soak.

1/2 kati (300g) prawns, shelled, retain skin for stock

1/2 kati (300g) *samchian bak* (belly pork), boiled until tender, shred finely

1/2 - 1 tin shredded bamboo shoot

Spring onions (use only the green portion) cut into 1 cm lengths

Coriander leaf to garnish

1 1/2 tablespoons pounded garlic; 1 1/2 - 2 tablespoons

pounded shallots



Char Bek Singapura.





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Char Ju-Hi.

In hot oil fry garlic and shallots until brown, add bamboo shoots, belly pork, prawns and prawn stock (enough to just cover). Let boil for 2 minutes, add salt and a little black sauce for colour, let boil another 3 minutes. Add *ju-hi* water, boil again, add *ju-hi*, spring onions. Turn few times and remove to plate. Garnish with coriander leaf and sprinkle some pepper before serving.

#### **MEE SUA TAU (Noodles)**

This dish is sometimes cooked to celebrate birthdays because noodles symbolise longevity. The traditional way is to serve it in syrup with a hard boiled egg. In fact the customary gift for an elder's birthday (especially *tuah seh jit*) is *mee sua*, rock sugar, eggs and a pair of red candles.

In this savoury version, crab meat adds a touch of luxury to a special occasion, and the garnish of coriander leaf, called *wan swee*, also sounds like 'long life'.

For 6-8 people:

- 6-8 small bundles of dried *mee sua* (fine dried wheat noodles)
- 1 1/2 tablespoons pounded garlic
- 300g belly pork, boiled and sliced into strips, keep gravy
- 600g prawns, steam and reserve juice for stock
- 400-500g steamed crab meat
- 1 egg omelette cut into strips
- 1 long fish cake sliced into strips
- Fried shallots and *wan swee* (coriander) leaves

Fry pounded garlic until lightly browned. Add sliced pork and half the prawns. Add pork stock and a little prawn stock. Add salt to taste and a little black sauce for colour. Set aside until ready to serve.

Blanch *mee sua* in hot water until softened and run under cold water. Just before serving, tip the *mee sua* into the gravy, stir well and scoop out onto serving plate. Pour gravy over and garnish with remaining prawns, crab meat, omelette and fish cake strips, fried shallots and coriander leaves.

Photography by Jason Ong



Mee Sua Tau.



# FATHER

**Robert Yeo** shares recollections of his father, Yeo Koon Yam

**M**y father, Yeo Koon Yam, was known to family members as *Bulat* (round). He was the eldest son and number three in birth, with two older sisters before him.

As Chinese families have high expectations of their first son, father had responsibilities thrust upon him early. He stepped into the shoes of his father when the old man retired. He joined the Union Insurance Society of Canton, Ltd, staying with this company for 32 years before moving to another insurance company. With his firm mannerisms, he could appear stern and aloof to the point of being intimidating. To his younger sisters and brother and his younger cousins in Singapore, Seremban and Tangkak, he was *Hiah Bulat*, the eldest brother, they all bear the same first two names; YEO KOON \_\_\_\_: a total of one brother and six cousins.

Father was also methodical, an aspect of his character probably stemming from his background in insurance. This is evidenced in both his clear and graceful handwriting and in his careful keeping of records of domestic and financial dealings. He once received a letter from an ex-colleague who moved to Kuala Lumpur and had asked father to recommend him to a job in the federal capital. The concluding paragraph read, "So, it was disappointing and I am now expecting a reply from your secretary in due course. Please notify that that my address has been changed. I must apologise for the inconvenience to you and wishing you all the best of health." The words "disappointed" and "notify" are circled with the corrections, "disappointing" and "note", penciled in neatly above.

His attention to detail also came across in the one game he played and excelled, namely billiards. To it, he brought an intelligent artistry and immense passion, whether it was with three or four balls or snooker or skittles (a game played with small wooden sticks). He won countless titles, mostly in Singapore, made 28 centuries, held memberships to several clubs, including the YMCA, where he coached; but more on this later.

Born in 1909, father married at the relatively late age of 29. Perhaps eldest son duties weighed on him: at 21, his bride was 8 years younger than him. The *Malaya Tribune* of Tuesday 6, December, 1938, carried this notice under Domestic Occurrence Marriage "YEO-OON. Yeo Koon Yam, eldest son of Mr Yeo Teck Hock and the late Mrs Yeo Teck Hock to Oon Kim Lian, second daughter of Mr Oon Ee Thiam, at 11 a.m., on Sunday, 4th December 1938, at No 5 Valley Road."



The wedding photograph shows him in a white suit and trousers and mother in a white bridal gown. The marriage united two Baba families, one from Serangoon and the other from Katong. They had met through her father who liked the eligible young man and asked if he would like to meet his daughters. The eldest, Daisy, was not eligible, probably because she was already romantically involved and so attention moved to the second girl, known within the family as Nancy.

According to mother, father was particular. He wanted a woman who was physically acceptable, in the sense that she must not have obvious defects like a huge mole on her face that would spoil her looks; she also had to have social graces. He sent his two older sisters to assess her and they, together with the potential bride's mother and older sister, went out together, visiting places like Happy World. Later, they all had dinner but he sat apart, as if examining her. They met again subsequently but did not go on single dates.





He must have been satisfied. Besides having the social skills he required, among which was the ability to cook, mind the house and look after his family, mother was also beautiful, as the wedding photo attests.

The red wedding certificate shows two angels, young boys, holding the lid of a decorative box as if about to lift the cover. Inside are Chinese letters on two pages and the signatures of the couple as well as that of their parents, Oon Ee Thiam, Yeo Teck Hock and an "X" with the words "Mark of Madam Lee Eng Guat (Mrs Yeo Teck Hock)" and Tay Lian Teck.

#### A PASSION FOR BILLIARDS

Father's silver trophies along with two photographs in my possession betray his passion for the game of billiards.

He must have taken up the game early in life for one trophy dates from 1931, when he was only twenty-two. He remained dedicated to billiards through to his marriage in 1938 and well into the early 60s.

His evenings, after work, were spent in various clubs of which he was an active member. 1954 was a highly active year for him as a serious competitor – that was when he recorded the following: 4-ball winner YMCA presented by Cycle & Carriage Co Ltd, Jay Thuan Siang Challenge Cup 4 Ball winner for 2 consecutive years from 1953 – 1954.

He was particularly close to his cousin, Koon Chye, who resided in Malaysia, and they played billiards whenever Uncle Chye was in Singapore or when father traveled up to Tangkak, Malacca or

Kuala Lumpur.

On 24 December 1959, Uncle Chye wrote to him:

24 December 1959

My dear H. Bulat,

Thanks for your note advising me of your retransfer. I quite agree with you that you cannot find any decent table in K.L. to play. If you were to go to the S.C.R.C too you cannot get the environment as in Singapore and I heard that the attitude of the players is similar to that of the S.C. Swimming Club in that they have a "gang" who monopolises the table.

As a matter of fact I was trying to go up to K.L. during this month but as you are no more there the programme was called off.

At the Malacca C.R.C I played several games of 3-ball billiards with a Dr. Loke who seems to know you. He is a Foochow, doing private practice, speaks Malay and several Chinese dialects very fluently. The Club table is now equipped with carbon light heaters and travels much faster but the Stracham cloth is a bit coarse.

The Club played the Muar Chinese at Muar in a 5 game friendly and lost 3-2. Juan and myself, in 4 and 3 ball games resp. came out with colours. The former made a break of 61 and several 30s to finish the game before his opponent reached the 1/2 way mark.

Hope you enjoy the Xmas holidays at the Aston table.

With loves.



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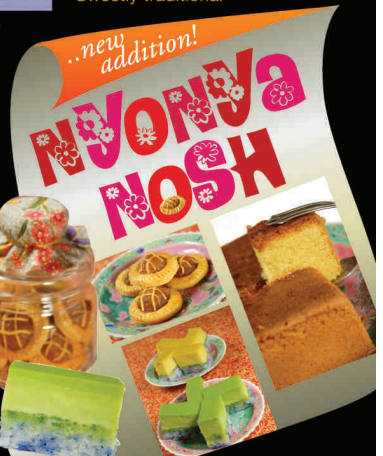
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Father replied on 30 December:

30th December 1959

**My dear Chye,**

Thank you for your letter with M.O. enclosed and I enclose herewith my official receipt for the payment.

So Dr. Loke is now in Malacca. Yes, he used to play at the YMCA and I believe he was in Kuching sometime back. It is a pity that the Stracham cloth is a bit coarse but if the table is properly heated slow spin balls will take effect. My congratulations to you and Juan and I sincerely hope that before long you will be able to compile big breaks and eventually step in my shoes. I know it is not easy to score a century with open play unless one is always consistent. In any case, your eyesight is better than mine and I wish you all the best. I have up to date scored 28 centuries and I am not sure if I can add some more before I become too old for the game. Of course I do not play much nowadays. About twice a week during the week ends at Aston. Last week I had two breaks of 78 and 84. I should have got a century on the second break but missed a simple top table in off the red due to excitement.

Nothing much to add for the moment meanwhile our best regards and enquiries to all.

Loves,

Yours ever.

His closeness to Uncle Chye is evident in his expressed hope that the former would be as good as him in winning many championships and score

centuries, if not exactly 28. A century in billiards, whether 3-ball, 4-ball or snooker, is probably the equivalent of a century in cricket and is no mean feat. The letter also hinted at old age and this was to affect him in two ways: declining eyesight and a subsequent loss of interest in the game. This was divulged in a letter of 13 July 1960 to Uncle Chye: 'I look forward to see (sic) you in action in Billiards and I hope your game has improved considerably. Of course, I do not play very much as I have lost some interest in the game. I only play during the weekends.'

The photograph above shows him in his role as a player. The photographer has caught a movement of great concentration in a snooker game. Father holds his cue in his right hand and in his left the rest cue, both in a state of suspension, while he contemplates his next shot. As any tactician knows, the next shot, if well-managed, will lead another through skilful positioning of the white ball in relation to the red and coloured balls. He must make it easy for himself to pot the next coloured ball. His long-sleeved shirt is folded on both arms to allow relative freedom of movement as he calculates angles, wonders if he should pot the coloured ball - is it the high scoring black? Or is it blocked? His opponent is nowhere in sight and the person standing behind looks like an interested but relaxed bystander who face in the shadow foregrounds my father's earnest expression. One can literally see him cogitate.

Did father, in this instance, go on to make one of his 28 centuries?

It is indeed a remarkable picture. ❖

*Part 2 follows in our next issue.*

*Extracted from Robert Yeo's memoir, Routes: A Singaporean Life, 1940-1975, to be published by Singapore University Press in the first quarter of 2009.*





# THE LITTLE NYONYA

A little phenomenon on local television Channel 8 recently caused a sensation among Singapore viewers. *The Little Nyonya* was rated among the best serials on local TV in the past fifteen years. We know of many non-Chinese speaking nyonyas and babas who just had to tune in to the serial every night from compulsion.

It drew both bouquets and brickbats from the public, and elicited a torrent of responses at the [peranakan.org.sg](http://peranakan.org.sg) online forum under Rants, raves and daily views. Outraged forum contributors wrote that the accurate depiction of Peranakan culture had been undermined with the serial being staged in Mandarin rather than Baba Malay, and were upset with how its plot and characterisations might lead TV viewers to conclude that Peranakans are an evil and conniving lot. Others, however, praised the serial for its efforts in recapturing a bygone time, and highlighted the need for there to be certain elements of a typical soap opera to keep an audience engaged.

Amidst the fuss, it is clear that the *Little Nyonya* has stoked interest in Baba culture to a fever pitch. The serial's debut was followed by hits to The Peranakan Association's website more than tripling, while Peranakan businesses saw their takings increase markedly. The Chan family museum in Malacca that was used as one of the primary shooting locations chalked

up a huge increase in visits by Singaporeans, not to mention Singapore's own Peranakan Museum. And not a few babas observed that nyonyas never looked so good than on TV. Peter Wee of Peranakan Association was cultural adviser to the MediaCorp team that produced this successful serial.

Cutting straight to the eye of all the drama, both reel and real, Colin Chee took the opportunity to ask Tan Lay Hong, Manager for Channel & Brand Management for MediaCorp's Channel 8, about the *Little Nyonya*, exclusively for *The Peranakan*.

**1** What got you started on writing and producing something as dramatic as the *Little Nyonya*? Were there any initial reservations that the characters would be speaking in Mandarin when nyonyas and babas of that period do not speak Mandarin at all, not even now?

The richness and colours of Peranakan culture had captivated us. Channel 8 is a Mandarin channel and any programme that we telecast would invariably be in Mandarin. As with our previous projects like "The Guest People" and "Teochew Family" that had people who were traditionally non Mandarin-speaking, what we are presenting is the richness of the culture and the heritage, with some dialect terminologies included. Thus there weren't reservations in this aspect.



2

**Were the characters based on any real persons that the writers personally knew or heard in casual conversations? Were the incidents based on real happenings, such as the attempt to push someone into the well?**

No. As we usually stipulate in the clause at the start of our serial, this serial had not drawn inspiration from any particular real-known event. It's a fabrication of the Story Planner's fertile mind. Any similarity is just coincidental.

3

**What have you got to say about some nyonyas complaining that the serial put the Peranakan community in a bad light, that they are wicked?**

As with any serial, there are bad guys and there are good guys. Like the resident villain of "The Little Nyonya" is a Peranakan, the kind souls and the protagonist, Yueniang, are likewise of Peranakan descent. So that's quite evenly balanced out.

4

**Are there plans to have a sequel, given the success of this serial?**

No. There is currently no plan for a sequel. "The Little Nyonya" ends with the closure of Yueniang's life, and it best stays that way, at least for now.

5

**What would you have done better if you had the chance to? What were the challenges you faced shooting such a cultural drama?**

As with all our other dramas, the pursuit for perfection is relentless. There are so many things that we could have done better, and this spurs us on to do better in our future serials. As with all cultural serials, the research for all things past poses a major challenge. That said, it is gratifying that we have managed to present the culture as best as we could, and to see that viewers appreciate the fruit of our labour.

6

**What were your main challenges in doing this serial?**

The Peranakan culture has such depth and long heritage that it is not possible for us to fully internalise in a short time. We are just thankful that with help from the community, we have managed to grasp the gist and to regurgitate it in "The Little Nyonya".



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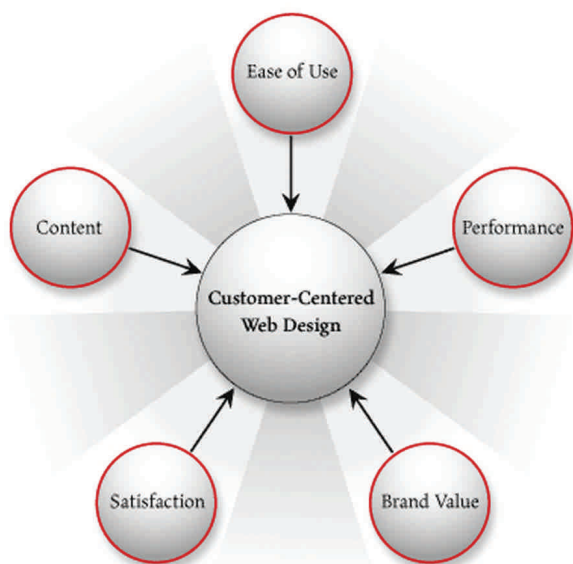
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# NYONYA DI LUAR NEGERI (ABROAD)

A long-standing member of the growing Peranakan diaspora, **Josephine Chia** shares the process of discovering her true calling

**M**y mother, born and bred in Malacca, was a very beautiful and refined lady, and a proud Peranakan. Although she went from wealth to poverty when she married my father and came to Singapore to live with him in a shanty hut in Kampong Potong Pasir, she retained a sophisticated and regal air. My book, *Frog Under a Coconut Shell* was written to honour her. She instilled in me a sense of tradition and culture, helping me stay true to my Peranakan heritage when unthinking peers made fun of me because I looked Malay, spoke Malay and yet am Chinese.

Here in England, where I have lived for nearly 30 years, I still cherish my Peranakan heritage because it has conferred me with a degree of distinction. Unlike the racial prejudice that exists in big cities, in the small village of Bracklesham Bay in West Sussex, on the south coast of England approximately 70 miles outside London, there is a healthy respect for other cultures, and many have gone out of their way to make me feel most welcome. I know of no other ethnic person in the area; indeed, when I first arrived, I was very conscious of the colour of my skin.

Bracklesham Bay is a seaside village, close to *The Witterings*, famous for its picturesque coastline. The Witterings is divided into East and West Witterings and the word *witterings* is said to be a corruption of an old English word, *wuthers* (as in *Wuthering Heights*) which means strong winds - and the winds are strong! Although my house is a ten minute walk from the shore, the tides are so high and the winds so forceful that my garden fence was totally demolished in a gale one January!

When I was nominated in 1992 for the UK's top literary prize for short fiction, the Ian St. James Awards, the local

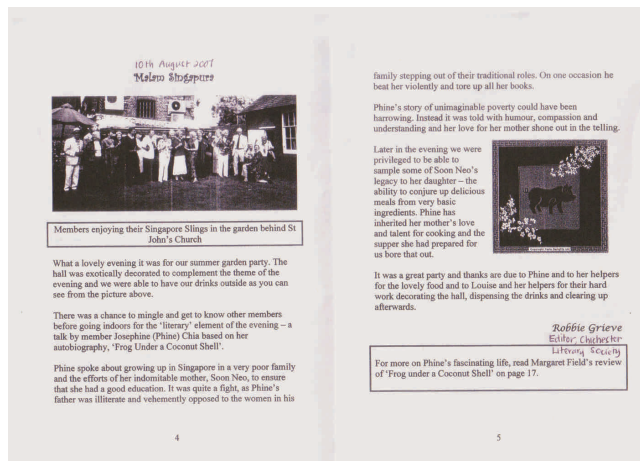
newspaper ran the headline 'Singapore-born Surrey Writer in Line for Major Fiction Award'. Subsequently, when my short story won the prize, two different newspapers interviewed me and their headlines read, 'Short Story Wins Grayshott Writer Major Prize' and 'Tropical Fever with a Bonus.' (Grayshott was my former village, which was once home to George Bernard Shaw.)

*Tropical Fever* is the title of my winning short story. The combined publicity helped to establish me as a writer. From then on, my cookery book, *Taste of Singapore*, was sold in the local bookshop. The bookshop's owner invited me to hold a Singapore Food Tasting event in her store to promote the book. She requested that I dress in my sarong kebaya, and I happily obliged. However, as the shop's fire insurance did not permit me to have a stove with open flames, I cooked *ayam lemak* and *bee hoon goreng* at home and carried them across in large rice-cookers. The fragrance of the *lemak* proved enough to draw many passers-by inside.

I received compliments on my outfit and questions about Singapore and Peranakan culture. The English were genuinely interested, and it led me to realise that I could both write and be a "self-appointed ambassador" of sorts, promoting Peranakan culture, Singapore and Singaporean Cookery. My cookery book contains recipes based on Singaporean/Peranakan food. Many Westerners lamented that they could not produce the recipes from books they bought in the Far East, so I researched the local supermarkets to see what ingredients were available and adjusted the recipes accordingly. I expect the nyonyas reading this to cringe. In defence, I have to explain that while ethnic or Chinese shops stock specialised ingredients in cities like London and Birmingham, such ingredients are



Food Tasting At Kings.



Review Malam Singapura.



hard to come by in the countryside. For myself, the nearest Chinese supermarket is in the city of Portsmouth, a distance of some 50 miles - I can only afford to make the journey there once a month!

Waterstones, one of UK's largest bookstores, once invited me to their branch in Guildford, Surrey, to do a Singaporean cookery demonstration. I went in my sarong kebaya, and on that one Saturday, they sold 70 copies of my cookery book. Many of the people who came to watch the cooking demonstrations were new to Singaporean food or were families of those who had been stationed in Singapore. Then, when *Frog Under a Coconut Shell* came out in 2002, I began to receive invitations from Readers Groups and Women's Institutes to give talks about Singapore, the Peranakan culture and cooking demonstrations. I have also been asked to teach Singaporean cookery at Adult Learning Centres, and I always go dressed in my sarong kebaya. In winter, because the outfit is more suited for the tropics, I have to wear a body-warmer underneath and top it off with a shawl round my shoulders!

My calendar for 2009 is already full with appointments to speak and teach. I prefer to stick to venues in the home counties of Surrey, Hampshire and West Sussex for these engagements because they are within a day's driving distance. Once, I had to give a talk and cookery demonstration in a village hall at the edge of Hampshire bordering on Wiltshire and the journey there and back was 160 miles, but I loved doing it! I also bottle my own chilli sauce to sell at these talks. It has no *belachan* in it because most Westerners do not like its taste, and it becomes suitable for vegetarians as well. Purists might squirm but I do feel that one has to adapt to one's surroundings. I used to have a stall at an annual event called *The Chilli Fiesta*, held at West Dean, a couple of miles North of Chichester, but I don't anymore as it is all becoming too much for me with age!

Still, my appreciative audiences always acknowledge me as a writer fulfilling a major dream. It is wonderful how they respect my ethnicity and yet acknowledge me as one of them. Although I am a nyonya abroad - *di luar negeri* - I no longer feel that I am a mere visitor. England has become home to me, just as Singapore had been. Acknowledging another country as home does not diminish the importance of Singapore and Peranakan culture for me because these are intrinsic to me - I am proud of both! ❖

# MARTIN LOH, PERANAKAN ARTIST

By Josephine Chia

**D**ressed completely in black and sporting a clean-shaven head, Martin cuts a remarkable figure. But far from being aloof, he is warm, easy-going and full of humility, attributing his artistic success to luck. His clothes are a sharp contrast to the vibrant colours of his paintings, rendered in the same striking hues as on our Peranakan batik and porcelain. Unsurprisingly, Martin was raised in a Peranakan household and is an avid collector of porcelain.

"I want my paintings to express joy," he says.

He isn't unaware that despair exists in this world but he does not want to convey such negativity on canvas. Instead, he wants people viewing his pictures to be indulged with joy. I found this outlook to be rather spiritual though Martin fought shy of admitting to any religious affinity. He was brought up as a Roman Catholic though he confessed that he was presently leaning towards Taoism, the religion of traditional Peranakans.

Martin was born to a Cantonese father and Peranakan mother. His father was originally from Penang but came to Singapore where he met the Peranakan nyonya who was to be his wife. Martin's memories of his childhood in Paya Lebar and Telok Kurau are reflected in most of his paintings, the minutiae of every-day life, like a bibik cooking, a nyonya embroidering or a small boy sitting on a potty. Only an artist with a wicked sense of humour could imbue these everyday activities with such verve and delight.

Martin's paintings are so full of life and originality that in a way, it came as no surprise to learn that he never formally trained in art. He began his career as a civil servant, became a journalist with *The Straits Times*, and then a stock-broker before his incarnation as a full-fledged artist, risking his own money to exhibit his works at the Substation in 1992, which resulted in an astonishing sell-out. Martin wanted to express his own artistic visions and did not want to be educated-out of his own creativity so he stayed away from institutions that might cramp his style. He works in water-colour and mixed media and his paintings show no adherence to notions of light and shadow or the law of perspective. In some ways, the latter makes his paintings quite naive-like and rather Picasso-resque to me.

"I am not trying to convey realism," he said. "I'm painting how I see life."

Indeed, there is a lot of life to see in any one of Martin's paintings because his images are busy, with clusters of small images anchored by the main theme of each painting. When asked, Martin laughed and said that this was perhaps a reflection of the way he likes his home to be - cluttered with furniture and sentimental mementoes.







Nonetheless, there is a sense of comfort in all the activity that sweeps round the canvas. Also, the sum total of the smaller images is pleasing to the eye as Martin ensures that the Yin and Yang elements of each composition are balanced.

There are many further elements of Chinese culture or more particularly Peranakan culture present in Martin's works which definitely mark him out as an Asian artist rather than a Western one. Martin called his first exhibition *Naive Images of Days Gone By*. It was the art critic, Sabapathy, who declared that Martin's works should be called Peranakan Art since it embodied so much of our Peranakan way of life, colour and expression. Truly, traditional Peranakans who view his pictures would smile and feel the pull of heart-strings as the images do evoke nostalgic memories of a way of life that is mostly gone for the majority of us as our culture becomes diluted with more inter-racial marriages and modernity.

In keeping with his philosophy of spreading only joy on canvas, Martin mainly portrays the *ada-ada* Peranakan nyonya and matriarch who has money, time and leisure. Most of his renditions of the women show them in poses reminiscent of wealthy Victorian ladies in their parlour, with arms draped casually across the back of sofas. However, these women are also engaged in the activities of cooking, embroidering, beading and the myriad aspects of home-making for which Peranakan women are famed. Indeed, one great appeal of Martin's art is his ability to bring these domestic tasks to life as if celebrating the joys of home-making. He portrays the Peranakan women as strong and capable, and in many of his paintings he even depicts them as Goddesses. In his painting, *Women of High Esteem*, he



portrays four females: a Peranakan Kwan Yin, a Peranakan Mazu (Goddess of the Sea) and a Peranakan Virgin Mary – and the fourth woman of high esteem is a Peranakan Matriarch! Whether you subscribe to the correctness of such a portrayal is a matter for the intellect but in terms of art, his artistic license makes for fascinating conjectures.

There is a notable absence of men in Martin's paintings. When asked why this was so, Martin said that in his observation of households, their running tends to be the domain of women.

"Besides," he said. "I can't paint colourful flowers on men's shirts and trousers but I can paint any design I like onto women's clothing and use all the colours I like!"

Certainly, the use of colour is Martin's bold signature in his art. He reckons that the Peranakan usage of colours stands out because of our courage to put strong colours together, defying convention. His works are explosions of colour and joy and he is truly our Peranakan Artist! As his clients are mainly foreigners, Martin could end up an unwitting ambassador of Peranakan culture overseas. ❖



# BABA AND NYONYA MEDIUMS

In the second of a two-part series, **William Gwee Thian Hock** recalls the early days when pantheons of deities or *datoks* spoke the Baba patois!

When a serious crisis surfaced in a Baba home, the family would, with rare exceptions, consult with a spirit medium who was a fellow baba or nyonya, rather than seek help at a Taoist temple. This was not only to facilitate verbal communication with the medium but to ensure that the deity invoked spoke the Baba language or, at the very least, colloquial Malay! Happily enough, baba and nyonya mediums tended to regularly associate with deities that satisfied this condition. Even so, the family would exercise much discretion in their choice of the spirit medium they entrusted their problems and social standing with, for it was important that they were seen associating with proper sources. Thus, the integrity of the medium and his or her good reputation was crucial. The family's choice further hinged upon by how "sia" (effective spiritually) the deity was. Before the advent of mass media, a medium's reliability was sealed by word of mouth.

As the result of high demand, there were numerous baba and nyonya mediums all over Singapore. Those who were "professionals" levied fixed but affordable consultation fees while the others were happy to receive a token payment in the form of an ang pow. Yet other mediums exacted payment not in cash but in kind. For example, the medium from Alor Gajah, mentioned in Part 1, made it known that her deity preferred to be presented with a comb of bananas and about 500g of sugar as a gesture of thanks. It was believed that should any medium become avaricious and levy an exorbitant fee, their resident deity might be displeased and sever further contact. Even if the deity was tolerant, the baba and nyonya clients might take exception and conclude that it was not in their interest to continue patronizing a medium more intent on making money than serving as a source of help and hope to those in distress. It was generally expected that the deity had come with the sole purpose of helping humankind rather than to help its medium amass wealth.

Due to the presence of numerous baba and nyonya mediums, it naturally followed that there were as many deities speaking Baba Malay! They had colourful names such as *Datok Bintang*, *Datok Machap*, *Datok Mambang*, *Datok Naning*, *Datok Puloh Besar*, *Datok Buaya*, *Datok Bisu*, *Datok Keramat Gunting Puteh*, *Datok Nenek Esah*, *Datok Nenek Semilan Puloh Semilan Lengkong*, *Dewa Sapri*, *Dewa Sakti*, *Dewa Chempaka Puteh* and *Sri Bunian* to name but a few! Amongst this list, *Datok Mambang* stood unique. The term does not refer to a single deity but a pantheon of spirits collectively known as *Mambang*. There were really 24 spirits in the *Mambang* with names such as *Datok Nenek Logok Batu*, *Datok Arimo*, *Peteri Bali*, *Peteri Kechik*, *Si Mayang Banyak Anak*, *Si Ali Bertulang*, *Si Minggu*, *Siti Mayang*, *Panglima Si-Gentar Bumi* and so forth. As a very young boy I looked forward to attending a *Mambang* session because

one of the spirits enjoyed eating bananas and would share the rest of the bunch that had been offered in prayer with the devotees present, particularly with the children.

Not suprisingly, some baba and nyonya mediums had interesting ways to summon and send off a deity. A nyonya medium practicing in Siang Lim Park off Geylang Road needed her clients and friends to sing a song to lull her into a trance and then continue singing after the arrival of the deity until the end of the sêance. It was indeed an unforgettable sight to see her dancing gracefully to the tune at the initial arrival of the deity and then again when the deity was about to take its leave. The song was usually *Tudong Periok*.

## A Bizzare Ritual

The most bizarre ritual I witnessed belongs to the *Datok Naning* medium. After this baba medium had offered joss sticks and lit the incense burner, he sat cross-legged to await the arrival of the deity having earlier dressed himself in Malay costume with a *keris* tucked in his waist. Behind him was a thick squarish solid beam forming the bottom support for a window. Suddenly he flung his head backward to hit the beam squarely, powerfully and very loudly. In that instant, the whole house shook. The deity had arrived. Later, when sending the deity off, he repeated the same shocking head bang and woke up none the worse for the experience. Considering he was a "full time professional" medium, and must bang his head forcefully twice per session with the deity, it is indeed miraculous that he suffered no ill effects right till his retirement at a very advanced age!

That same night, after the sêance was concluded, the medium mingled with the big crowd outside in the garden. There was a Malay ronggeng troupe to provide the evening's entertainment. During a break from dancing the violinist began to play *Mas Merah*, a Malay classic. The medium suddenly stiffened and fell as though hit by a hefty axe. His family members rushed into the house, fetched the necessary garments and once again dressed him up with *keris* and all. The deity had come back uninvited because *Mas Merah* was its favourite song! The deity began to dance to the song with the unsheathed *keris* in hand. It was a memorable sight to behold. The deity would not let the violinist stop. It was more than an hour later when the deity finally decided to end the dance. Still in a trance, the medium walked into the house and once again banged the back of his head very hard on the beam before awaking!





# VOICING CULTURE

*From the Istana to the heartlands and everywhere in between!*

By Chan Eng Thai

**T**he Peranakan Association's Peranakan Voices (PVs) have certainly had a busy year in 2008:

**11 March:** They sang at the Istana Annual Staff Dinner at the Marina Mandarin, together with GT Lye and Maniam of the *Chempakas* who performed a skit. President and Mrs Nathan were present.

**8 April:** A specially written pantun *Pantun Sekolah Tinggi Dunman* that I penned was recited for Dunman High's Mount Sinai Campus.

**19 April:** The PVs set up stalls at the Singapore Chinese Girls' School fun fair to raise funds for the school.

**25 April:** The grand opening of the Peranakan Museum at Armenian Street. The PVs performed before the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong. They also performed on 26 April and 11 May 2008 for the public.

**12 July:** The Marine Parade Community Club invited the PVs to perform for the "Marine Crescent Residents Committee Bibik & Baba extravaganza". The PVs serenaded a cross-section of heartlanders.

**26 July:** The National Heritage Board organized a series of performances at Suntec City in conjunction with Racial Harmony Week. The PVs found themselves performing right after a belly dancing troupe!

**14 November:** The 108th Dinner & Dance of the Peranakan Association saw the PVs belting out their repertoire of songs to appreciative dinner guests at Raffles Town Club.

**11 December:** The Friends of the Museum invited the PVs to perform at the Peranakan Museum.

**5-7 December:** The 21st Baba Nyonya Convention in Malacca saw 12 PVs singing Hawaiian songs with a Peranakan twist at the Convention dinner on 6 December.

**20 December:** The 80th birthday dinner of Baba Joseph Ang Boon Kwee at Yan Palace Restaurant, had the PVs, Bibik Hogan and Chan Eng Thai entertaining the audience on the ways of celebrating a "*tua seh jit*" in the Peranakan tradition.

**28 December:** For the second year running the PVs were invited to perform at the Church of the Holy Family Feast Day Dinner in Katong.

Here is a pantun for the PVs to thank them and to toast their efforts in promoting Peranakan cultures:

**Lau Jiat Betol Malam Ini, Bibiks & Babas are really happy,  
Gembira Hati Baba Bibik, Tonight it is boisterous indeed,  
Anak Chuchu Laki Bini, Husband & wife, children &  
grandchildren,  
Suka Dengair Lagu PVs! Love to hear the songs of  
the PVs!**

*The PVs invite all who are young at heart to join them in making Peranakan culture known and loved through music and song. Younger babas and nonyas are needed! Those interested can call Francis Chia at 9680 5912 or Angeline Kong at 6863 4532. ❖*

## BABA AND NYONYA MEDIUMS

(cont'd from page 32)

Some Baba-Nyonya mediums refrained from consuming pork because of the deity associated with their practice. There was a nyonya medium practising along Ceylon Road whose deity originated from a *keramat* (shrine of a Muslim saint). Her son was a classmate of mine. I recently met him and was informed that after his mother's retirement from the practice, he took over and continued to practise until he suffered a stroke. He has partially recovered. Despite no longer practising as a medium he continues to abstain from pork, along with every member of his family, including his grandchildren. According to him, the Saint from his *keramat* originated from a Middle East source. There were other Baba-Nyonya mediums who partially refrained from consuming pork during their active years as mediums. In cases where they held weekly seances, they would refrain from pork on that day, usually a Thursday. Some of their Baba-Nyonya clients followed suit also and refrained from consuming pork on the day they visited the medium.

Many Baba families visited their family spirit medium weekly regardless of whether there were outstanding family problems or not. The nyonya would bring along with her several packets

(equivalent to the number of her family members), each containing a lime and flowers, preferably of seven different varieties. During the consultation, she would open a packet and name a particular member of her family to indicate that the packet was for that person. The medium, in a trance, would pick up the lime, slice it, peer into it and advise the nyonya what had been 'seen' in the lime. If something negative had been detected, the person the lime was connected to would be warned of the forthcoming negative events. If nothing negative was seen, the lime and flowers were rewrapped and taken home. The person to whom the packet belonged would pour the flowers into a pail of water, squeeze the lime juice in as well, and use the contents to bathe. This act was known as *potong lemo* (cutting the lime).

Today, spirit medium consultation is an activity of the past in the Baba community. With the demise of the Baba-Nyonya mediums and changing times and attitudes, the *Datoks* are not likely to ever return. The surviving members of the Baba community who experienced spirit medium activities are left with a fast-fading memory of what had once been a vital aspect of their culture. ❖



# TOWARDS GREATER AWARENESS OF OUR BABA NYONYA HERITAGE

*Chan Eng Thai revels in fellowship with the various Peranakan communities of Southeast Asia at last December's Convention*

**T**he 22nd Baba Nyonya Convention was held in Malacca from 4-6 December, 2008. Delegates came from Penang, Kuala Lumpur (which now has its own Peranakan association known as *Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor*), Singapore and Phuket, which sent 80 delegates, the largest number from the four Peranakan associations.

The Peranakan Association, Singapore (TPA) sent a delegation of about 30 members, who reached Malacca at noon on 4 December, and went straight to the various shopping centres to commence their shopping sprees!

The Convention Dinner had the Governor of Malacca as its guest of honour. It also featured the first-ever Kebaya Queen contest with contestants from the four associations. While the winning Kebaya Queen was 75-year-old Penang nyonya, Molek Lee, our Peranakan Voices' Angeline Kong was voted Miss Photogenic. The guests at the convention dinner were entertained by songs and performances from the Malacca BaNyas and the Melodians, with many joining in to joget till past midnight.

The Convention proper opened the next morning with two speakers: Professor Lee Su Kim from Kuala Lumpur gave a lively and interesting account of growing up in a Peranakan family in the early 1960s while James Quake spoke about the mechanism of preserving one's Peranakan legacy.

In the afternoon, delegates were treated to a boat ride along the Malacca River while others went hunting for antiques at Jonker Street.

Unfortunately, inclement weather forced a poolside Hawaiian-theme dinner that evening indoors. Nonetheless, the mood was anything but dampened, with fire-eating performers and our Peranakan Voices' rendition of Hawaiian songs making it a very Hawaiian affair.

The next day, the Malacca Peranakan Association gave the delegates a rousing farewell lunch at their club premises and stalls that had been set up to sell kueh, curry powder,



*The Peranakan Voices add Hawaiian flavour to the evening.*



*Convention delegates.*

belachan and sarongs found their wares sold out even before lunch commenced.

The next Baba Convention will be held in November 2009 in Singapore and we look forward to welcoming as many delegates as possible. ❖

*Baba Konvensyen choot miah lama,*

*Tiap taon semua Peranakan tungguh,*

*Ini taon Singapura jadi tuan rumah,*

*Baba Nyonya datang bersatu padu!*

**The Baba Convention, very well known,**

**The Peranakans look forward to every year,**

**This year, Singapore is the host,**

**Baba Nyonya come with one voice & heart!**





# A VICTORIAN AFFAIR

By Emeric Lau

It was an evening of lush songs and *joget* aplenty as the Dunearn Ballroom of the Raffles Town Club was colonised for a second consecutive year by the babas and nyonyas in attendance at the 108th Peranakan Ball. With English ivy trailing the railings, candles galore and massive floral arrangements in full bloom, the stage was pretty much set for a remarkable party – and what a fabulous bash it proved.

Taking advantage of the current red-hot interest in Peranakan culture, our President, Baba Lee Kip Lee, made a clarion call for new and younger members to join The Peranakan Association and contribute – membership forms

were distributed and prominent members were on hand to answer queries.

The main act of the evening, an impressive seven-piece band, The Locomotions, delivered rousing medleys that even had a few couples hitting the dancefloor before dinner! Also taking the stage at various points were the Peranakan Voices, Vocaluptuous and performers from Main Wayang. Stringing it all together with his usual exuberance was host Alvin Yapp, who conducted lucky draws and games that kept everyone rolling with laughter.





# Wishing you a healthy & wealthy lunar new year! Panjang-panjang umur!

Have you been longing to re-discover your Baba Roots & Culture?  
Come be an active 'Kaki' or 'Kawan' of Main Wayang and join us in our regular  
cultural events & interactive activities! Better still, play a part in our exciting shows!  
There's something for everyone! From Children to Youth! For Family & Friends!



Siapa Baba? musical re-run by popular demand



Chap Goh Meh Celebrations in Penang



Baba Nyonya in Concert



Afternoon Soirees @ Ramay Ramay Sunday



Peranakan Party-cipation @ National Day Celebrations



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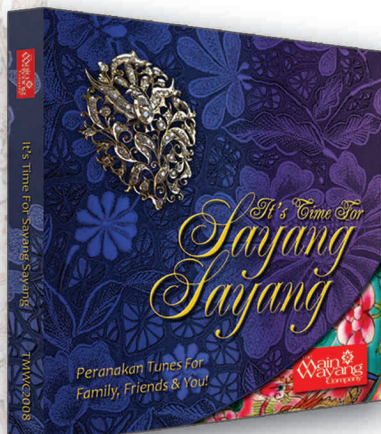


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Get your copy of our latest music CD,  
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Featuring songs from the musical 'Siapa Baba?' including  
'Nyonya of my Heart', 'Di Kebun Bunga' & 'Sedara Baba Nyonya'.



**Proud to be Peranakan!**

The Main Wayang Company Pte Ltd  
Website @ [www.mainwayang.com](http://www.mainwayang.com)

Contact us at +65-63843181 or E-mail: [peranakan@mainwayang.com](mailto:peranakan@mainwayang.com)





# SIAPA BABA? By Philip Yeo

It all started when my wife Magdalene learnt from her *kakis* at one of their get-togethers that a new Peranakan musical was due to be staged. What excited her was the ticket price of only \$15 - \$20, compared to previous shows that were much pricier.

I was less than enthusiastic. What? Another sitcom-style drama with the all-too-familiar scenes, props and Baba jokes! What about the cast? Won't they all look too familiar? And where will it be staged? The Republic Polytechnic in Woodlands! *Kus semangat* ("bless my soul"), I have to travel from one corner of the Earth (we are living in the East Coast) to the other. Couldn't *Main Wayang* stage it any nearer?

Still, having been married for 29 years, I knew better than to object. If my wife missed the show, she would *meleteh* (prolonged grumbling) until I go bonkers. This is an accepted fact of married life which all new couples must learn - accommodate and there will be peace and harmony.

Came show day, we took a 'leisurely' drive from East Coast to Woodlands - a 'mere' 50-minutes! If I had my choice, I would have preferred to drive up to Malacca, my hometown.

However, my resistance slowly dissipated when I slid into the theatre's oh-so-comfortable seats. And when the lights dimmed and the curtains went up, I was sold.

Unlike the Peranakan plays I had been to, this production was a sophisticated fusion of traditional settings with modern theatrical techniques and staging. We enjoyed well-choreographed movements and dancing to Peranakan tunes - something I had not seen performed before. Then there was the use of projections - just like in the Star Wars movie - when the *kong cho* (great grandfather) 'spoke' to the audience from his hanging portrait and the three daughters sang and wooed their potential suitors.

The singing and music were fabulous. No strained or



*Little Babas & Nyonyas.*

stretched vocal cords. What came out was pure music to my ears.

The cast comprised a full representation of ages from delightful children to the sophisticated senior babas and nyonyas who were so graceful in their movements.

Underlining *Siapa Baba* was the all-important message that our Peranakan culture is truly unique, one so rich and refined that we must not lose it. We must make an effort to pass it down to our children, and from them to the next. As quoted from the play: "Others can copy the Peranakan way of cooking, wear the dress of a Peranakan but one thing they can NOT copy is the language of the Peranakan and the way we speak it."

As the curtains fell, I gladly took back all earlier reservations. I wish the show had never ended. ❖



*Stage and floor celebrate with the joget.*

“The musical breaks new ground in the theatrical artistry of Peranakan shows with refreshing new songs, on top of multiple visual and speaking platforms, instead of the usual background props.

“What does *Siapa Baba* do for me as a Peranakan? Walk a foot taller I suppose. And be prouder than ever before to belong to a unique community with such a rich heritage.

“If you have not seen *Siapa Baba*, clamour for the next season. The show defines us.”

*Kenny Tan*

*First cousins Philip and Kenny are two 7th generation Peranakans in their 50s who discovered their writing talents after being inspired by *Siapa Baba*.*



# PERFORMING AT THE AUSTRALIAN MALAYSIAN FILM FESTIVAL 2008

By Ivy Lee-Chan Gek Kim

**T**he Peranakan singers made their second appearance at the Australian Malaysian Film Festival this year. Following our successful debut performance at last year's Festival, the singers from the Peranakan Association Australia Inc., thrilled the crowd once again at this year's event which was held at ACMI Cinemas, Federation Square, Melbourne, from 15 - 18 August 2008.

On the evening of 15 August, at the launch of the Film Festival which featured some of Malaysia's best award-winning films, the Peranakan singers performed as part of a cultural showcase of songs and dances with a Malaysian flavour. Dressed to the nines, the ladies, in colourful sarong kebayas complete with flowers in their hair, and the men in batik shirts, sang and did the *joget* to the delight of the audience who kept asking for more. Some responsive members of the audience came forward to *joget* with our singers to the strains of *Geylang Si-Paku Geylang*. Our item preceded the screening of the award-winning film, *Sepi*. Some members of the audience later commented that songs like *Rasa Sayang* and *Di-Tanjung Katong*, among those in our repertoire of eight songs, lent a strong touch of nostalgia. We were also happy to have among us our young Peranakans: young *nyonyas*



Doing the *joget*.

and babas, also dressed in sarong kebaya and batik attire, joining us to sing and dance. The Association also set up a display of Peranakan artifacts.

Our song items were also presented before the screening of the films on the following two days: on Saturday when the film, *Congka*, was featured and on Sunday when members of the audience were thrilled by the gripping tale in the film *Waris Jari Hantu*.



Some of our young Peranakans.



Our artifacts on display.

Not only did the *nyonyas* and *babas* enjoy singing at the Australian Malaysian Film Festival, but it gave us an opportunity to showcase our heritage in Melbourne and to promote our culture beyond the shores of Malaysia and Singapore. In addition, the presence of and interest shown by our young Peranakans bear promise that our culture will be sustained by the next generation. ❖

## WEE LIN JOINS CGI

**C**ongratulations to our Peranakan Association member, Mr Wee Lin, who has been invited by former American President Bill Clinton to become a member of the Clinton Global Initiative Asia ([www.clintonglobalinitiative.org](http://www.clintonglobalinitiative.org)), through his commitment to "raising awareness at the local level so that individuals earning less than median income in Singapore have access to affordable food that also requires less fuel and water in the preparation process".

His work is already producing results, such as providing food at cost to those in need through a "kedai mobil" (*The Straits Times*, 10 January, 2009) as well as free medical consultation to foreign workers (*The Straits Times*, 12 January 2009). Wee Lin is the founder of SunLove Abode for the Intellectually Infirm, as well as the former owner of the residence

that has become Baba House, a heritage house now owned by the National University of Singapore. He was also ranked one of '48 Asian Altruists' by Forbes magazine last year, and received a 'Friend of Heritage' award from the National Heritage Board in 2006. ❖





# SEARCHING FOR MAK CHO

by Christine Lee

**D**oes anybody recognize the lady seated on the log? Discovering her maiden name and a little of her family background will help in solving a long-time mystery and completing my family genealogy.

According to her youngest son, Seow Peck Gam, who recently died at the age of 92, her name was Chia \_\_ Neo. He believed that Mrs Seow was related to the Chia Hood Theam family and that Hood Theam was her eldest brother. However, this cannot be verified by the Chia family.

Another source claims that Mrs Seow hailed from Kuala Lumpur and that she had an elder brother and two other sisters. Mrs Seow and her husband, Seow Siew Keng (1870 - 1917) had five sons and one daughter.

If anyone recalls Mrs Seow or her husband, please contact me. Your contribution will help in the documentation of the Seow Siew Keng Family Tree.

Click [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg) for more information. Christine Lee can be reached directly at [charimakcho@gmail.com](mailto:charimakcho@gmail.com)



*My great grandmother, Mrs Seow Siew Keng with her grandsons, Edward and older brother Jimmy (ca. 1935).*

## Peranakan Chinese in Globalising Southeast Asia: The Cases of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia

Friday 22 May 2009

9am - 5pm

National Library Building

Possibility Room

100 Victoria Street

Singapore 188064

An international conference organised by NUS Museum & Chinese Heritage Centre with the support of Ms Agnes Tan, in memory of her father the late Tun Tan Cheng Lock.

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## 109TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Association's 109th Annual General Meeting will be held on Saturday, 28 March, 2009, at 2.30 pm at the Regional English Language Centre (RELC).

## WELCOME

The Association welcomes our new life members:

Dr Anthony Goh	Mrs Midori Nukumizu
Mrs Genevieve Lim-Jeffs	Mr Ng Yew Lee
Mrs Fong-Chan Wai Han	Mr Thomas Tan Chai Eng
Mr Johnny Huang ZhengHui	Dr Patsy Tan
Mrs Lim-Seah Yu-Li	Mr Teh Lip Keong
Ms Shireen Lim	Mr Yoshitaka Yanase

## OBITUARY

Our deepest condolences to the family of Mr Eng Ah Koon upon his demise.

## ERRATUM

**The Peranakan, April - June 2008, pp 27 & 29**

We regret the following errors in the captions for the pictures in this article:

**On page 27**, the Tay Kak Sie temple is wrongly captioned as "The oldest temple in Semarang, Sam Po Kong", and the Liem Clan temple is wrongly captioned as "The main temple, the Tay Kak Sie".

**On page 29**, the Tan Clan temple facade is wrongly captioned as belonging to the Liem Clan temple. The other images are correctly captioned.



# THE PERANAKAN GUIDE SINGAPORE

## MUSEUMS

**Peranakan Museum.** Opened on 26 April 2008. See the world's first national Peranakan Museum with the most comprehensive and finest collection of Peranakan artefacts. Be delighted by the vibrant and colourful culture of the Babas and Nonyas. Singapore's newest boutique museum examines the centres of Peranakan culture in Malacca, Penang and Singapore, and traces its links to as far as Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand. Peranakan Museum, 39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941.



website: [www.peranakanmuseum.sg](http://www.peranakanmuseum.sg)  
Email: [nhb\\_pm\\_vs@nhb.gov.sg](mailto:nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg)  
Tel: +65 6332 2982.

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



**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.** The first museum in the region to display a wide range of artefacts from across Asia, the ACM not surprisingly has some important Peranakan treasures. The Mary and Philbert Chin Gallery has some lavish examples of gold jewellery, sreh boxes and other paraphernalia, some encrusted with diamonds, and fine batik textiles from the north coast of Java, all made for the Peranakan market.

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 Spottiswoode Park, Blair Road and Neil 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](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.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 now occupied by restaurants and offices. 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.





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