



# Especially for our members

## BEADING WORKSHOP

Dates: Wednesdays, 24 Jun, 1 and 22 Jul, 12 Aug  
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Time: 7-9pm

Venue: Rumah Bebe, 113 East Coast Road

Fee: S\$300 (Members), S\$350 (Non-members)

To register or make enquiries, please see contact details below.

### Workshop covers:

- Identifying types of beads
- Designs and patterns
- How to prepare the beading frame and base canvas
- Beading techniques

### Note:

- Fees include all beading and sewing materials: frame, needles, thread, canvas, pattern and beads (size 15, Japanese glass beads)
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- A minimum group size of five students is needed to proceed with the workshop



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## ACTIVITIES

Please surf into [www.peranakan.org.sg/social/](http://www.peranakan.org.sg/social/) and view our full activities calendar.

### Highlights:

- The Intan is an actual living Baba home - join us there for a special new members get-together and tour on 4 Jul.
- The Baba House also organises bi-monthly tours for our members.



To register for the Beading Workshop, enquire and place orders our New Merchandise, or for more information on our activities, **please email [events@peranakan.org.sg](mailto:events@peranakan.org.sg) or call 6255-0704.**

To be a member, you don't need to be Peranakan, sign up at [www.peranakan.org.sg/members/](http://www.peranakan.org.sg/members/)



THE  
PERANAKAN  
ASSOCIATION  
SINGAPORE

www.peranakan.org.sg

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# THE PERANAKAN CELEBRATES 15 YEARS!

Sometime in September 2004, I received a call from my uncle Thomas Tan, then the Second Vice-President of The Peranakan Association. "Why don't you help us out at the magazine? We can do with your experience as a journalist. Come and meet up with Peter Lee over lunch."

A week later. One free Peranakan lunch at Penang Place in Jurong. Good vibes with Peter. I start my stint as a heritage volunteer with the October-December 2004

## LETTER

*As a non-Peranakan interested in the Peranakan culture, a tour guide at the Peranakan Museum and a researcher on Peranakan exhibitions, The Peranakan magazine has been an invaluable resource to me. I can be kept updated on the latest Peranakan events, try my hand at Peranakan cooking with the relatively simple recipes and hear fascinating first-hand stories of the old Baba days and current lives of Babas in Singapore and all over the world.*

*These stories also come in handy in bringing alive artefacts to visitors in the museum when I guide. By consistently featuring key events and happenings, the early issues of the publication have also proved to be a good source of information illuminating the community's public activities through the years. Clearly, the utility and popularity of the publication is evident through its blossoming from being a two-page black-and-white newsletter to a substantial, glossy magazine today. Kudos to the editorial team for all these years of hard work and I look forward to many more interesting issues ahead!*

Jackie Yöong

issue – *Java Jive* splashed across the cover against a batik background, in pink and brown. That renewed my love affair with the Peranakan culture, my entry into the world of Singapore Babas and Nyonyas, my return to long-forgotten roots. Five years on, I quietly celebrate with this issue: my two children, Olivia and Keith, are proudly listed on the back page as the latest members of the Association.

Olivia has volunteered in the new-blood membership sub-committee. I say new blood because all six of them are in their 20s or early 30s! Led by Claire Seet, the group is brimming with ideas to recruit more members and we, of the more august generation really look forward to the burst of new energy within. Keith, now studying in Australia, will no doubt take on a role when he returns.

Each of us in the editorial team has our own Peranakan

story to tell. Peter was roped in a good 10 years earlier by his father Kip Lee, then a committee member of the Association. Peter produced the first Peranakan Newsletter, two photostated sheets, on an Apple Mac Classic computer. Before that, Uncle Kip relished his journalistic streak on a typewriter and sent out the Association circulars.

From such humble beginnings, The Peranakan magazine has graduated into all things elegant and



beautiful. Just like our culture, the glamorous part of it, if I may say so. Each glossy quarterly receives accolades from members and friends alike and we, the editorial team just love it!

Producing a high quality magazine is no piece of cake. It takes time, much thought and, for me, the tight neck and shoulders are telling when it comes to poring over articles and photos, editing and planning the pages. But ours is a dream team, eager to meet to freely pitch in ideas and respective skills - from art historian, architect, businessmen, creative director, former banker and ex-journalists to compliance officer even – and getting even more motivated each time we receive a compliment. It is also a world of difference when more and more contributors send in articles, each time getting better, more informative, more colourful. We are grateful.

This issue we celebrate 15 years of *The Peranakan* with a refreshing, clean new look from front to back. We hope you like it! This issue focuses on the theme of Renewal, The Cycle of Life, spanning the realms of birthdays and funerals, baby things and comfort food for new mothers, Peranakan-style. We also celebrate the Peranakan Museum's first anniversary, Indonesia's first Peranakan festival and Penang's latest heritage museum. What a feast!

Thanks, Uncle Thomas.

Linda Chee

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# A LABOUR OF LOVE: 15 YEARS OF THE PERANAKAN

By Peter Lee

"WHEN I WAS YOUNG I WANTED TO BE A JOURNALIST, BUT COULD NOT PURSUE THIS AMBITION AS I HAD TO HELP IN THE FAMILY BUSINESS. MANY DECADES LATER AFTER I RETIRED AND BECAME A COMMITTEE MEMBER OF THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION, I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO DEVELOP THE ASSOCIATION'S CIRCULAR TO MEMBERS INTO A LIVELIER NEWSLETTER FORMAT, WHICH DR WEE KIM WEE\* ENCOURAGED."

- Lee Kip Lee, President of the Peranakan Association

The first circular with a newsletter format and an official masthead, *The Peranakan Association Newsletter* appeared in June 1994 as two photostated sheets, with news about an upcoming dinner and talk by Kenneth Cheo, author of *A Baba Wedding*, a list of new members, and an announcement about Felix Chia's new play, *Mari Kita Main Wayang*.

The magazine has come a long way since then. That photostated newsletter has become a full colour printed magazine, and with this issue it goes through yet another revamp, with a new masthead design. The circulation of the publication has also seen great transformation: from a newsletter just for members, to the 4,000 copies today, which are distributed among our

advertisers as well as at the Peranakan Museum, the Baba House and other tourist venues, including hotels. Work has begun among members of the editorial committee to set a target of printing up to 10,000 copies. And all this for FREE!

## Essential Partners

The magazine has been a labour of love for all, a combined effort between the volunteers in the editorial committee and writers, as well as the advertisers, who have all gone out of their way to make this publication a truly unique beacon in Singapore's cultural landscape.

A big THANK YOU to all volunteers, contributors, patrons and supporters.

## Milestones of The Peranakan



**June 1994**

The first quarterly issue of *The Peranakan Association Newsletter* is published, designed and laid out on an Apple Mac Classic.

**November 1994**

After three issues, the layout is refined and upgraded with improved software.

**September 1995**

The photostat version gives way to the first printed issue with photographs. An official publishing license is issued by the then Ministry of Information and the Arts.

**December 1995**

The newsletter has its first advertisement from auction house Christie's, announcing a forthcoming auction of Straits Chinese artefacts.

**September-November 1996**

The publication changes its name to *The Peranakan*.

**April-June 1998**

The longest continuous advertiser, Katong Antique House, places its first advertisement.

\* Dr Wee Kim Wee was the first Peranakan President of Singapore, from 1985-1993.

## ANNIVERSARY

# Congratulations!

We congratulate *The Peranakan* on its 15th birthday!

Far from exhibiting the wild behaviour commonly associated with teenage years, *The Peranakan* is showing every sign of having developed into a mature publication, confident in its own identity! The articles appearing in each issue - ranging from the popular to the scholarly - are a fine tribute to the enthusiasm and dedication of your editorial team and contributing writers. They make the Peranakan culture come alive for your readers.

We at the Peranakan Museum are just one year old. We look to our elders - in the magazine as well as at the Association - for advice and collaboration, so that we too can make the Peranakan culture come alive, for our visitors.

**Kenson Kwok**, Director, *Asian Civilisations Museum & Peranakan Museum*

Congratulations on *The Peranakan's* 15th anniversary - truly a milestone in recording the association's and the community's history. Like the NUS Baba House, the magazine explores what is traditionally valued as well as looks at how the culture and the community are moving forward, promoting a lively exchange of ideas in the process.

**Christine Khor**, Director, *NUS Centre for the Arts, National University of Singapore*

"Kiong Hee" on a job well-done! *The Peranakan* has definitely become an important source of not only interesting historical events, personal experiences, activities and culinary records, but it is a testimony to the spirit and soul of a vibrant Peranakan community. Your magazine has contributed towards propagating our culture on the local as well as the international front.

**Datuk Phua Jin Hock**, President, *Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka*

*The Peranakan* is a beautiful magazine and a wonderful repository of our culture. The articles, pictures and photos never fail to delight. I keep every single copy and cannot bear to discard any. The Peranakan Association of Singapore has produced a magazine of a very high quality for the past 15 years. That is really commendable. We send you our congratulations and best wishes, and hope to see *The Peranakan* grow from strength to strength.

**Dr Lee Su Kim**, President, *Peranakan Baba Nyonya Association of Kuala Lumpur & Selangor*

On behalf of the Peranakan Association Australia Inc., I wish to congratulate the editorial team on the 15th anniversary of *The Peranakan*. Your magazine is an effective means by which the younger generation, especially of Peranakans, can learn about our culture. It also serves as an important link between our people here and those in Singapore and Malaysia.

We Peranakans in Melbourne look forward to each issue which never fails to satisfy us. Your quality of work is an inspiration to us to emulate as we take our baby steps to launch our own publication in Melbourne. We wish you many more years of success and satisfaction in promoting our culture.

**Alfred Chi**, President, *Peranakan Association Australia Inc.*

As a publication *The Peranakan* has in no small measure helped to promote and sustain the culture amongst the Peranakan community. I am confident that it will yet be another legacy of our unique heritage. May it continue to flourish and endure for many generations to come.

**Dato' Seri Khoo Keat Siew**, President, *Persatuan Peranakan Cina Pulau Pinang*



### October-December 1999

A special issue with a full-colour cover is published to commemorate the Association's 99th anniversary. The next two issues however, revert back to the black and white newsletter format.



### July-September 2000

The Association publishes a special issue commemorating its Centenary, with a full colour cover.



### October-December 2000

A new format is launched, lasting till the July-September 2005 issue.



### October-December 2005

*The Peranakan* becomes a full-fledged magazine, taking on a vibrant new look. For the first time it goes full-colour inside and out and assumes a thematic approach to each issue.



### April-June 2009

To commemorate the magazine's 15th anniversary, *The Peranakan* undergoes an entire design transformation.

# Baba King's Ready 2 Eat Peranakan Favourites

Six of our Signature Dishes now come in frozen Ready-To-Eat packs for your enjoyment anytime.



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# WHEN THE STORK ARRIVES

By Cedric Tan

PERANAKAN TRADITIONS FOR NEW-BORN BABIES

Amongst the various Peranakan rites of passage, those relating to childbirth were the least practised and considered minor celebrations at most. It was normal for a married couple to have many children and thus such rites or celebrations did not take on much significance. After a big celebration at baby's first month, birthdays were celebrated at home with only the immediate family and close friends.

## Muah guek (first full moon celebration)

The first celebration for the new-born child is the full moon ceremony held exactly one lunar month after the baby's birth. After raising the *ji seh* and *tien tengs* (the surname lanterns and heavenly lantern hung above the entrance) and festooning the door with red *chaiki* (banner) in the morning, the head of the family lighted the remaining red candles from the wedding *sam kai* table (altar of the 'three realms' dedicated to the Emperor of Heaven). A used pair of red candles from the couple's wedding would have been wrapped in red paper and stashed away awaiting the arrival of the first born child. The candles were lighted to thank Ti Kong and the deities for their blessings and for the continuous good health of the baby.

Offerings in the form of fruit, red *kueh ku* and red hard-boiled eggs were laid on the family altar. Similar offerings were also presented on the ancestral altar as a formal announcement to the ancestors that there was a new member of the family.

In order to participate in the prayer, the mother of the baby would take a medicinal bath in a concoction of boiled ginger, lemon grass and dried *daon sempong* (*Blumea balsafimera*). This refreshing and cleansing bath was supposed to be her first proper bath after childbirth. Thereafter, she would be allowed to offer incense to the deities and ancestors.


After morning prayers, the baby's father, accompanied by relatives, would distribute packages of food to family members and close friends. For Malaccans, these usually consisted of an even number of red tortoise-shaped *kueh ku* and a similar number of red stained hard-boiled eggs. These items represented joy and fecundity respectively and would be personally delivered. The Penangites also distributed *nasi kunyit* (turmeric rice) with chicken curry alongside the red *kueh ku* and eggs. A tortoise-shaped *kueh ku* denoted the birth of a baby boy while a peach shaped *kueh ku* announced the arrival of a baby girl. The recipients would reciprocate with gifts like gold baby ornaments or an *ang pow*.

At home, the baby would be shaven clean, bathed, dressed in new attire and decked with the gold ornament gifts and shown off to visitors.

Later, a short prayer ceremony would take place on the baby's bed using a pair of red candles, incense, a teacup of *nasi pichit* (pressed cooked rice forming a conical shape above the brim of the container) and

one shelled hard-boiled egg in a saucer. These items were meant to appease the baby's *pocha* (guardian angel) so that the spirit would allow the baby to slumber peacefully. This *semayang pochá* would take a few minutes.

## Future birthdays

The baby would continue to receive *ang pows* every birthday and Lunar New Year until undergoing the *cheo thau* (the hair combing ceremony representing the transformation to adulthood). Birthday babies were also feted with *mee suah* (wheat vermicelli) and hard boiled egg served in syrup for longevity and health. As they grew, children could alternatively be served with highly delicious *mee suah* paired with a hard-boiled egg, pig liver and minced pork on their birthdays. 



## Tua seh jit (grand birthdays)

The first grand birthday celebration or *tua seh jit* was for the oldest in the family - the matriarch or patriarch - upon the 51st birthday. If you missed that or could not afford the cost, you had to wait till your 61st for the next big celebration! These were seen more as ritual than cause for merry celebration, and all had to be done right to ensure the senior lived till the next *tua seh jit*. Among other things, family and close friends would be treated to vermicelli soup or *mee suah tau*, symbolising longevity.

Birthdays in the years between would be observed on a smaller scale. A standard

birthday gift for the elderly would be - you guessed it - a box of dried *mee suah*, 10 eggs and a pair of red candles two and a half feet high. A bibik's birthday could mean a session of *cherki* among her friends and relatives.

From the 1950s, modern dinner parties held at restaurants with music and dancing became *de rigueur*. The entertainment could include singing of *dondang sayang*, old *bangsawan* favourites and popular songs by P Ramlee. Guests would *joget* or *ronggeng* (a Malay dance influenced by Portuguese music).

- by Tan Kuning



# ON BABIES AND BENGKONGS

CYNTHIA WEE-HOEFER REMINISCES ON HER NEW-BORNS



*Cynthia feeding her son Hans-Sen in his po kia ee (bamboo chair), 1991.*

If only the little ones could speak, how they would have protested!

Shaving the head, piercing tender ears and giving boys girls' names to ward off evil spirits - these are but a few of the seemingly bizarre rites and superstitions of Peranakan parents to ensure their child's safe and prosperous future.

Being married to an *orang puteh* (foreigner), I over-compensated and took pride in enforcing certain Peranakan rites of passage when I became a mother some 17 years ago. My husband and I were fortunate to adopt a beautiful baby boy. He arrived with great fanfare all of one month old and with a clean-shaven head.

Months later, as we fussed over the newest and noisiest member of the family, someone entreated, "Shouldn't we stop his fountain of drool (*ayer lior*)?" That set events in motion! We ordered a dozen *kueh pong pia* or the Chinese puff pastry with sweet fillings from the shop in Joo Chiat. Strung the palm-sized cakes into a necklace. Sat the boy down before the altar and invited the adults to take a cake, broke it apart and wiped off the saliva from his mouth. Then - wait for it - ate the *kueh*! Miraculously, his excessive spittle dried up a week later.

When I cross-checked with other households whether such an exercise was commonplace, there was a lot of head-scratching. It seems that only my circle of relatives practised this obscure ritual.

Five months after the adoption, I conceived. Old wags

spouted the 'I-told-you-so' line that if you adopt, you will get your own child (*pangge adek*). Blessed with a healthy baby girl, we named her Han Li and embarked on various practices to celebrate *muah guek* or her first month of life.

When a baby's umbilical cord drops off naturally, it is wrapped in a square of cotton. Ghastly as it sounds, this bit of flesh resembles a dried *sng boey* (pickled plum). Some old folks drop it off among trees or cast it into the sea. We kept the piece in a drawer and forgot all about it.

Our First Vice-president, Peter Wee, explained that a century ago when women delivered in their own homes attended by mid-wives, it was the duty of the father to place the birth placenta in an earthen pot, which was then buried in the family grounds or at a place where it would not be disturbed. This practice is unheard of in these days of hi-tech modern maternity wards.

Upon turning one month old, the newborn is shaved of its head of molt (fine hair). This is seen as a cleansing ritual. Bathed and dressed in new apparel, the child is taken to the temple for a blessing. Other folks just trim off the child's fringe and nape hair in a symbolic gesture and scatter it to the wind. This step of purification signifies the emergence of a full person no longer a part of the mother's womb, an important step forward in the baby's development.

To give thanks we celebrated Han Li's *muah guek*



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## FEATURE



Left: A few families also practised the 'pong pia tradition'. Here, Kimberly Ho, the daughter of my god-sister, is presented with the pastry, 1989.

Han Li the birthday baby picks lucky numbers for the 4-D lottery. Note the gold adornments, 1993.

through two cultures. We ordered dozens of Western-style cakes from our favourite confectionary in Katong. These were distributed to colleagues and our Western acquaintances to share the good tidings.

For our relatives and close friends, we had the turmeric-flavoured glutinous rice, a pair of red-dyed eggs and red *kueh ku* (nyonya cakes) packed in square boxes.

Baby's first outing started at the temple with a simple ceremony, after which it was off to visit the oldest members of the family. Gifts of *angpow* or gold jewellery were bestowed upon the child though the trend these days is to offer designer silver spoons, booties, porcelain feeding sets or clothing.

The more well-off families would celebrate with a grand dinner if the newborn was a male.

At this point the mother's confinement period aided by the *guck ma* or nurse maid would be declared over. In earlier times, a Malay *dukun* (midwife) was hired and her chores included securing the mother's stomach with the *bengkong* (a girdle) and setting up a burner with incense to *asap* or smoke the body. The mother was allowed to bathe in herbal water and wash her hair.

At the age of four months, the child was propped with pillows into a *po kia ee* (bamboo baby chair) for yet another milestone. The child was given his first taste of solid food, usually rice porridge or mushy Nestum oats while seated on the stool. What a joy it was to watch the cute mouth pucker with the hesitant taste of something new. And then to see the pink lips part and disgorge a liquid mess!


It was around this time too when we embarked on the *pong pia* ritual to eliminate dribble just before teething.

Another practice in our home was tucking baby into the *boey-boey sarong* (cloth cradle) and bouncing her off to slumberland.

Before we knew it, weeks turned into months, and baby turned one. To mark the first birthday, we prepared *mee suah* (wheat vermicelli) in light syrup with one or two hard-boiled eggs added. The noodles must be cooked in long strands to ensure longevity.

The birthday child got a mouthful of the soup along with an *angpow* for luck. The whole family went to the

temple and made donations to charity.

Back home, a party and birthday cake awaited. What should a one-year old do before this attractive display but poke a stubby finger into the creamy surface and get a taste of the sweet life! 

## THE COLLECTION OF KATONG ANTIQUE HOUSE

Infant Clothing circa 1940s



208 East Coast Road Singapore 428907  
Tel: 63458544 Fax: 63451220

## FEATURE

# THINGS FOR THE LITTLE ONES

By Linda Chee



Noddy, with his lips worn off from frequent washing, in my little rombong.

When I was a very little girl, I think it was in 1960, my uncle's girlfriend knitted me a Noddy doll. So clever and pretty she was! I adored her. But alas, he did not marry her.

Growing up, I stashed away my treasured Noddy with other *barang anak kechik* (little children's things) I had rummaged from my mother's and grandmother's *rombong* (basketry woven boxes) through the years. I took them out from time to time and marveled just looking at them.

I still do.

I enjoy every detail because to me, they are artefacts of pure skill. *Baju hari-hari* (daily wear) that were lovingly and perfectly hand-stitched. Things made for the privileged

Anglophile Baba household of those days, where little Babas and Nyonyas, especially the male scions, were pampered and pandered to.

From birth, a whole wardrobe with accessories awaited the little ones, including the *barot* (corset wrap) for newborn babies, *o to* (stomach cover), *boey ta* (bibs) and *tangkal* (amulets for protection). Featured here are some daily wear from my own *rombong* and accessories from Patrick Phoa's Heritage Shop and Peter Wee's Katong Antique House. Peter took delight in showing me what was meant by 'born with a silver spoon in the mouth'. He even unearthed an imported baby bottle with the rubber teat still packed in plastic!



Perfectly even hand stitching.



(Clockwise from top left): A little baju panjang, collared top, toddler's batik pants, o to (stomach cover) made from the Nyonya's pretty remnant material.





Left: Silver gelang kaki (anklets),  
Below: Pendant on chain, both  
from The Heritage Shop.



Baby rattler  
from The  
Heritage Shop.



Peter Wee's personal cutlery. He explained  
that the silver pusher on the left was sed  
to push food on to the spoon and the  
egg-shaped spoon was for feeding solids,  
probably to wean the toddler from his  
bottle feeds.



A 'brand-new' baby bottle with  
rubber teat, imported from England  
with its original pre-war packaging.



Tangkal (amulets) from Heritage  
Shop. from The Heritage Shop.



Peter Wee's own boey ta  
(bibs) from his childhood.

# CONFINEMENT COOKING

by Daisy Tan

TRADITIONAL FOODS FOR THE NEW MOTHER



*Chicken with wine and wood ear fungus.*

Although not practised across the board nowadays, engaging a 'confinement nanny' is still something many new mothers do to help take care of their baby and cook nutritious food for them after delivery right through the period of post-natal confinement, which usually lasts for a month.

New mothers should not neglect to get sufficient rest and also partake of the restorative diets they need after nine months of pregnancy. The long-standing logic is that having had her body stretched open for birth, post-natal ladies are susceptible to both loss of body warmth and strength. They therefore require 'heaty' foods to stay in the pink of health.

During the confinement, new mothers should eat frequently, in small portions. Eating full meals or too much meat can hamper the absorption of nutrients and digestion. This makes it harder to restore the mother's original figure.

Mothers should also drink more soup and beverages to replenish water loss. For breast-feeding mothers, liquid promotes lactation and prevents constipation. However, plain water is not recommended as this will cause 'wind' and result in a case of colic for the baby.

During pregnancy, all the nutrients the mothers-to-be have eaten would mostly go to the baby so during confinement, mothers need to replenish the nutrients in their bodies.

## What's good for the new mother:

- **red dates and longan tea:** these help drain away blood accumulated in the uterus during pregnancy.
- **meat:** a source of protein, fat and phosphorus. Its nutritional value is enhanced when cooked with beans.
- **sesame oil:** an indispensable calcium boost for new mothers after delivery.

- **eggplant (brinjal):** rich in fiber, these aid intestinal peristalsis and avert constipation.
- **sea cucumbers:** they strengthen the bones with collagen.
- **mutton-based soup:** best consumed four weeks after delivery, the soup re-energises the body.
- **dang gui soup:** drunk every three days after the first week of confinement, it replenishes hormones.
- **dried fish maw:** a good source of protein, vitamins and calcium.
- **fish & papaya soup:** improves lactation.

## Recipes for confinement:

### CHICKEN WITH WINE AND WOOD EAR FUNGUS

- wood ear fungus helps to remove post natal blood accumulated in the uterus.

## Ingredients:

- (A) ½ kg chicken  
20g wood ear fungus (soaked)  
150g cooked peanuts  
2 tbsp wolf berries (*qi zhi*)
- (B) 1 tbsp sesame oil  
100g shredded old ginger
- (C) Rice wine to taste  
Salt to taste  
2 cups of water

## Method:

1. Stir fry (B) until fragrant. Add in (A). Stir fry well. Pour in 2 cups of water and bring to the boil.
2. Reduce to low heat and boil for 15 more minutes.
3. Season with (C) and bring to the boil and serve hot.



### STEAMED FISH WITH DRIED LILY BUDS

- lily buds promote urination, stop bleeding and facilitate lactation.

#### Ingredients:

- (A) 400g cod fish  
1tbsp shredded old ginger  
2 sprigs spring onion, sectioned  
1 sprig Chinese parsley, sectioned  
1 tbsp shredded carrot
- (B) 20g dried lily buds  
10g cloud ear fungus
- (C) 1 tbsp soy sauce  
half tsp sugar  
Salt to taste  
1 tsp sesame oil  
Pepper to taste  
2 tbsp *shao xing* wine  
Half cup water

#### Method:

1. Soak (B) in water. Wash and drain.
2. Mix (B) and (C). Pour on fish. Arrange on steamer and steam for 12 minutes.
3. Sprinkle ginger, spring onion, Chinese parsley and carrot on top of the fish and serve hot.

### BEEF SOUP WITH PEARL BEANS

- this soup helps to expel wind in the body (beef can be substituted with other types of meat).

#### Ingredients:

- (A) 400g beef  
150g *gegen* (pueraria root, radix puerariae)  
100g pearl beans  
10 red dates  
30g dried oysters  
3 slices old ginger
- (B) salt and pepper to taste

#### Method:

1. Bring 2 litres of water to the boil in pot. Add in all the (A) ingredients.

2. Bring to the boil and reduce to low heat. Boil for 2 hours.
3. Season with (B) and serve hot.


### DOUBLE-BOILED POLYGONUM AND CHICKEN

- Polygonum soup helps to strengthen the body, cure insomnia, dizziness and early grey hair.

#### Ingredients:

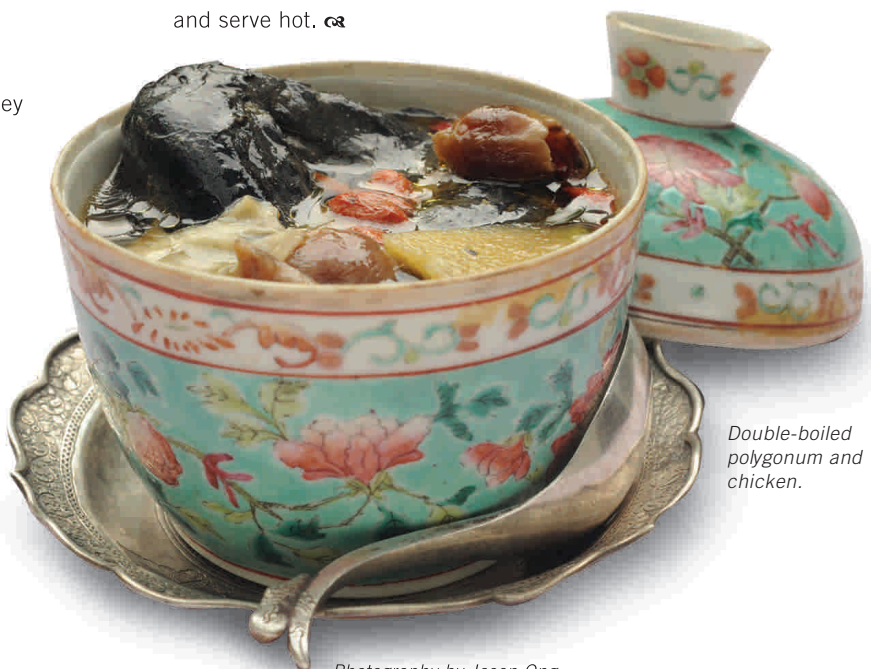
- (A) 20g *heshouwu* (polygonum multiflorum)  
10g sliced *dang gui* (chinese angelica, angelica sinensis)  
10 red dates  
10 dried longans  
1 black chicken
- (B) salt to taste  
2 tbsp *shao xing* wine

#### Method:

1. Put (A) in stewing pot. Pour in 1.5 litres of hot water.
2. Put stewing pot into a double boiler.
3. Cover and double boil for 5 hours. Stir in (B) and serve hot. 

*Left: Steamed fish with dried lily buds.*

*Right: Beef soup with pearl beans.*



*Double-boiled polygonum and chicken.*

*Photography by Jason Ong*



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# BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

By Tan Kuning

THE WORLD OF PERANAKAN FUNERAL AND MOURNING TRADITIONS

In contrast to the simplicity of birth rituals, at traditional Peranakan funerals, filial piety weighed heavily on the living, to respect the deceased and prepare them for their next life with much pomp and ceremony.

## Death preparations

Silver joss paper (*kertas perak*) was burnt in a *kuali* (wok) placed next to the dying person's bed to appease the spirits - equivalent to the angels of death - that were going to take him or her away.

Right after death occurred, all mirrors and reflective surfaces in the house had to be covered as the dead should not look into mirrors.

The body had to be appropriately dressed. Often, the deceased would have prepared his own death-robe (*siu ee*) long before. His or her eldest son had to don it first. In more elaborate rituals, a hut on stilts would be constructed and the son would climb in (*naik kajang*) then look out across land and sky while eating a bowl of *mee suah* (wheat vermicelli) in syrup to ensure his own longevity. Donning the *siu-ee*, modelled on Chinese Ming-Style robes, symbolised the deceased's desire to be freed forever from earthly Manchu rule! This unique political ritual became obsolete from 1911 when China became a republic. Still, many Peranakans carried on with this ritual up to the 1940s, ignoring the fact that 300 years of Manchu rule was no more.

## The wake

Attending a wake or funeral in the old days could be a traumatic experience. Lying in a Chinese coffin, lid open, the unembalmed corpse would have a pale and bluish face, sunken cheeks and forehead stretched against the skull beneath. The *siu-ee* could be the attire of a court lady or scholar, depending on the gender.

Family members positioned themselves around the massive wooden coffin, carved in the shape of a Chinese ingot. They would be in heavy mourning garments of jute sack cloth (*kain belachu*). The men would tie white bands around their heads. The women had to wear long white head scarves (*tudong*) like those worn by Muslim women. Sons-in-law wore blue pants and white shirts. On the funeral day, a son-in-law would don blue mourning attire called *boto pau*.

Standard supper fare would include *babi pongteh*, *kueh* (cakes) and drinks. Friends and distant relatives were encouraged to gamble: it is still common to see mahjong sessions or *cherki* games at wakes till long past midnight. The practice evolved as a way of making the wake look busy and well attended (*buat lao jiat sikit*), and so that the chief mourners would have company as they stood guard around the coffin through the night.

## Visitors

A visitor would be given two joss sticks by the eldest son to pay their respects to the deceased. Men would then be handed a string of red thread for good luck. A female family member would twine the red thread on the female visitor's *kerosang* (brooch). Nephews and nieces were expected to dress completely in black. Only mourning attire was permitted during the wake. Relatives could wear white, black, blue or green depending on the closeness of their relationship with the deceased. Bright or patterned clothes were prohibited. Male relatives who wore white shirts had to use a black arm-band.

## Meraong meratap and jatoh kaki

While the chief male mourners (*hau lam*) simply had to look solemn and observe Taoist rituals, female mourners (*hau ni*), were expected to be more expressive - indeed, some have drummed up truly melodramatic tableaux of sorrow! Usually comprising a chorus of daughters and daughters-in-law, they were required to demonstrate their sadness through wailing (*meraong*) and lamentation (*meratap*). These displays would

crescendo when there were many visitors around. The women would surround the coffin and wail their sorrows. This sometimes led to a competition to see who could do the 'best' *meratap*. Some even composed lyrical words to touch the hearts of those listening! On occasion, someone might take the opportunity to hint (*sindir*) at her own helplessness in light of her loved one's passing. This could irk certain parties, causing disagreements that would be dwelt upon long after the funeral. Taking turns, the women also had to *jatoh kaki* (fall on their knees) and crawl near a chosen elderly woman to *meraong* and *meratap*! Such acts were meant to tug at the heartstrings and enhance the mournful atmosphere.

## Nailing the coffin shut

As no embalming was done, the coffin had to be closed promptly on the first midnight by the undertaker. Before the coffin could be nailed shut, male mourners had to perform the necessary rituals and female mourners had to wail their hearts out. There is a Peranakan saying,



Funeral of Madam Koh Leng Choo, Haig Road, Singapore, c. late 1950s.

STRAITS ANTIQUES  
PAGE 16  
REFER TO FA FILE

## FEATURE

*'Sebelum dengar paku berbunyi belom tau apa mo jadi'* (Before the sound of nails is heard no one knows what may happen). This is typically used against one's enemy: unless the enemy is dead, no one can be certain that retribution will not come a-knocking.

### Bikin kong teck

Peranakan wakes also had a Buddhist element in an elaborate ritual called the *bikin kong teck* (making merit). Buddhist monks would be invited to chant sutras at a specially made altar to yield an abundance of merit that could help the deceased, by the grace of Buddha, enter heaven and attain Enlightenment. A Taoist practice then took over, that of *bakar rumah rumah* (burning of paper models of houses, furniture, clothes and automobiles). His eldest son would torch these scaled-down paper imitations of earthly possessions to be spirited to the deceased in his next life.

*Bikin kong teck* also involved overturning the table or *balek tok*. The table where the offerings were laid was cleared and turned upside down by the Buddhist monk. This symbolised two things: the transferring of merits to the deceased and the concept of Emptiness as outlined in Mahayana Buddhist teachings. It was a message to the living that *harta dunia tinggal di dunia* (what belonged to the world would remain with the world).

### The funeral

The hearse, usually a lorry, would be beautifully decorated with a palace-like structure called a *kuan ta* for the funeral. The coffin was hoisted into the *kuan ta* for a procession from the house to the nearest junction. The eldest son, carrying a white paper banner (*angkat tong guan*), led the procession. After that, all made their way to the cemetery. At the head of every bridge en route, the chief mourner was required to alight from his vehicle to get permission from the spirit of the bridge (*Tua Pek Kong*) for the deceased to cross it. This also signified permission to enter the spirit world. Throughout the journey, the undertaker would toss sheets of silver paper onto the streets to please or bribe evil spirits that might lead the deceased astray to hell. Littering was no offence back then!

### Seventh day prayers

The mourning rituals did not end after the burial. On the seventh day after the death, the family would visit the grave to pray (*semayang*) and give offerings to the dead. After that, the mourners would go to a specific temple like Thian Hock Keng at Telok Ayer Street to rid themselves of misfortune. They would enter the temple through the front gate, pray for peace and harmony in the family and leave the temple by the back door so that evil spirits would not follow them home.

### Semayang abu

An altar for the deceased would be set up at home to *tarok abu* (place ash), when the earth or soil gathered from above the covered grave would be placed in the joss urn. Each morning, the eldest son paid his respects by sticking two or four joss sticks into the urn. An ancestral tablet with the deceased's name would be placed upon the altar. Food

offerings had to be made for the *semayang che it chap go* (prayers on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, ie the full moon and new moon days).

On the first death anniversary there would be *semayang satu taon* (first year prayers) when an array of food, fruit and nyonya *kueh* would be laid out on a big table for the deceased to 'feast' on.

### Mourning

The mourning period would last two years for sons and their families, although the stock phrase is *'tuaha tiga taon'* (three years of mourning). Married daughters mourned according to the wishes of their parents-in-law as they shared the same household. Sons who had jobs to attend to would don white shirts and black pants, and don a black arm band for a whole year. Sons-in-law donned white shirts and blue pants. After one year, sons could wear white shirts and blue pants, while sons-in-law might stop mourning.

For the wives, daughters-in-law and unmarried daughters, mourning was more complicated. They would dress in black *sarongs* and *kebayas* for a week or two depending on family preference. It was said that mourning should be shed step by step (*tuaha mesti bertingkat*). For one whole year the *sarong* must be black but after one or two weeks of mourning the *kebayas* worn could be white or sport black and white floral patterns. This was called the one year of heavy mourning (*tuaha berat*).

After the first year, *sarongs* and *kebayas* with shades of blue against a white background were permitted. Shades of red, brown or yellow were prohibited. This period of 'blue mourning' (*tuaha biru*) would last for six to nine months of the second year. For the last three months of the mourning period, *sarongs* and *kebayas* with blue and green patterns against a white background could be worn for light mourning (*tuaha ringan*).

Throughout the mourning period, gold accessories were forbidden. Pearl and jade jewels set in silver were allowed. To end the mourning (*lepas tuaha*) there would be a ritual offering at the start of the third year, or *semayang tiga taon*, after which the family would revert to wearing more colourful clothes and gold. The women also adorned their hair with *bunga siantan* (ixora flowers) for good luck.

These phases of mourning had to be properly observed or there would be criticism from neighbours, friends and relatives for not respecting the deceased. It was also believed that if one had fulfilled one's filial duties, the spirit of the dead would be happy and protect and bless (*po pi*) the living with peace and prosperity. ☞

Offerings, including fruit and white *kueh* ku, before the covered coffin of Mrs Tan Keong Ann, mother of Tun Tan Cheng Lock, Heeren Street, Malacca, 1956.



Procession of mourners at the funeral of Mrs Tan Keong Ann, Heeren Street, Malacca, 1956.

# RUMAH

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CHAKAP CHAKAP

# KIM CHOO'S BAKCHANG STORY

COLIN CHEE HAS A CHAT WITH *BAKCHANG* MATRIARCH LEE KIM CHOO THROUGH HER GRANDSON RAYMOND WONG.

When we celebrate the Rice Dumpling Festival on the fifth month of the lunar year, sometime in May or June, it probably wouldn't be an exaggeration to say Singapore descends on Joo Chiat Place and East Coast Road to buy from the famed Kim Choo Kueh Chang. What is the story behind the *nyonya bakchang* brand and, more importantly, the woman who made it a household name?

## Where and from whom did you learn to make such great tasting nyonya and hokkien bak chang?

I was brought up by my nyonya maternal grandmother in Singapore. She was a good cook and she imparted her culinary skills to me. During the 1940s, my grandmother

sold *kueh* from her home to earn some pocket money. At different times of the year, she would make different *kueh* depending on the occasion, for example, *kueh bakol* for Chinese New Year, and *nyonya kueh chang* for the Rice Dumpling Festival. I gradually mastered the art of cooking from her.

## When did you start this business and what motivated you to start it?

During the 1950s, I started selling Nyonya dishes to earn a living for my family. Back then, my husband's income was insufficient to sustain us. It was only in the late 1950s that I decided to sell my grandmother's specialty, *nyonya kueh chang*, after a friend commented that they were very delicious and I ought to sell them.

## What was it like in the beginning? Preparation, setting up stall, selling - who were your customers?

At first, I did not even have money to rent a stall. I started making and selling the *nyonya kueh chang* under a banyan tree located beside the current Sing Hwa Coffeeshop in Joo Chiat Place. Back then, it was unusual and rare for a Nyonya to open a stall to sell *kueh*. Initially, my customers were Joo Chiat residents. Many of my maternal grandmother's Nyonya friends also supported me. Gradually, news spread and more Peranakan families from other parts of Singapore started coming to Joo Chiat to purchase my *nyonya kueh chang*. Some bibiks became regulars, placing orders in advance of the annual Rice Dumpling Festival. I particularly remember a bibik named Jim Neo who would buy my dumplings without fail every year. When she grew too old to come personally, she got her chauffeur to purchase the *nyonya chang* on her behalf by mentioning her name to me. In the 1970s, I moved my stall from under the banyan tree into the Sing Hwa Coffeeshop. As business prospered during the 1980s, I purchased the medical hall beside Sing Hwa Coffeeshop. It remains our main outlet.

## Is the recipe a family secret known to only a few family members? Is it kept in a safe deposit box?

My grandmother taught me the recipe. I have now passed it on to my son Sin Min and his wife, Helen. My daughter-in-law, though not a Peranakan, has a talent for cooking.



When she married into the family, she knew nothing about Nyonya food. I taught her everything from scratch and she has taken on the responsibility of cooking for the family. Helen has diligently learnt my culinary skills, including the *nyonya kueh chang*. She is the only person in the family whose cooking is on par with mine.

**How did Kim Choo get started on the small *bak chang* which are so popular among Singaporeans these days? Was it a customer's idea?**

By 1995, I was semi-retired. I left the business largely to Sin Min and Helen. Nowadays, though I no longer participate in the business operations, I still make it a point to come down to the shop every morning. In 1997, business was slow due to the Asian economic crisis. Helen came up with the idea of making mini *nyonya chang* to sell. I had my doubts then, but since I had left the business to the next generation, I did not interfere with their decisions. Surprisingly, the mini *nyonya chang* proved very popular. The older bibiks especially loved it. They called them *baby kueh chang*. Bibiks prefer the mini *chang* as it is easier for them to consume and digest.

**What are your plans for the future? Where do you see Kim Choo headed? A franchise business, perhaps?**

I do not have any plans as I have left everything in the hands of my son and his family. It is up to them to steer the business. I am happy to see that Sin Min's children are also hardworking and directly involved in the family business. ☺

## A TREASURE TROVE OF VINTAGE COLLECTIBLES

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



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A photograph taken during my travels in China, summer of 1986.

# ENG CHOON REVISITED

By Peter Lee

A SECOND TRIP TO THE ANCESTRAL HOMELAND, A DECADE AFTER THE FIRST, REVEALS CHANGED LANDSCAPES

In 1986 I visited Eng Choon (Yongchun), my family's ancestral village in China's Fujian province (see 'Of Bohea and Bakol Siah', *The Peranakan*, Jan-Mar 2009, pp 4-8). As a 23 year-old Singaporean at that time, I was a novelty and a curiosity, both in China and at home. Singapore had just re-established diplomatic links with the People's Republic. No one from my family had returned for two centuries and seven generations, and Communist China was still an alien, intimidating if not frightening, idea — Asia's bogeyman for over three decades of Communist rule. I grew up, like many Singaporeans, fearing the 'inevitability' of the 'domino effect'!

Going to China was therefore bizarre and exotic to family and friends. Nothing could be more foreign and remote to the Peranakan than the land of his ancestors — the proverbial *djinn buang anak mia tempat* ('the land where genies dispose children' or the ends of the earth). Almost all Peranakans switched to English language education by the early 20th century, while clinging on to ancient ancestral rites. China's revolutionary modernisation during the Republican and Communist eras, when most traditional celebrations were abbreviated, abandoned and censured, and the three decades of isolation when the bamboo curtain fell, created an ever-widening chasm between the Babas and their ancestral land. With almost no contact with the educated Chinese classes and poor understanding of Chinese culture, the Peranakans looked down on almost all other Chinese as ill-bred peasants and philistines, and worse, Communists!

But no, not I. I was filled with fantasies of Tang figurines, Ming ceramics and Shaolin temples — the 'refined exoticism' of China's imperial and scholarly past — from reading English language books I urged my father to buy for me as a young teenager (and *kungfu* flicks too of course). I was also fascinated by the austere heroism of the People's Republic, courtesy of *China Pictorial*, which my father also acquired for me. But the reality of China in the mid-1980s was a pungent mix of fact and fiction. Yes the palaces were sublime, as were the scent and sight of Chinese latrines.

In the propaganda images of *China Pictorial*, Maoist China had an almost Zen-like, utilitarian purity and purpose. I was hardly prepared for the cold, institutionalised functionalism that I encountered in reality. Our dormitories were like concrete prison cells, our toilet cubicles had doors that were only waist-high, and the concrete trough where we brushed our teeth was also used as an impromptu kitchen sink and was often clogged by cabbage (the only vegetable in winter) and chicken innards. We were granted the luxury of hot showers for a few hours a day and for six days a week. Chinese students however, only had hot water on the remaining day of the week! I began to crave the worst kinds of commercial snacks that I had seldom indulged in, like chocolates and potato chips, and even, believe it or not, 'real' Chinese food! Northern, Communist-era fare was oily, heavy and tasteless. The 'pork slices' with fried vegetables on menus were always rubbery sheets of pure lard. Wontons in Beijing then were stodgy dumplings

of minced lamb swimming in starchy hot water with only vinegar for taste! Fresh fish was a rarity. Did all good cooks run away from the People's Republic? Even the meals in the military canteen during my stint in National Service were better!

I could barely begin to describe all this when I left China in 1986 with my trove of photographs of pages from the Lee clan genealogical book. But I generated enough enthusiasm that a second trip to the ancestral village was planned, this time with a group of 10 family

members: my parents, my uncle Lee Kip Lin (*Ah Soke*) and his wife Li-ming (*Ng-chim*), my aunt Lee Joo Lee (*Ku Ma*), my father's cousin Ong Guat Ong (*Koh Manis*), and my cousins Lee Swee Gek (*Tachi Bintang*), Jerry Lee and his wife Margaret.

Almost 10 years had passed since the first trip. After a summer of travelling to the ends of China, reaching even Turfan at the border with Pakistan, I returned to London in the autumn of 1986 and completed my degree in Chinese studies, and then went on to pursue a Masters degree in Chinese art. Following this was a short internship at Christie's in London, then a year as an editor at *Orientations*, an art magazine based in Hong Kong. In 1994 I decided to return to Singapore and worked as an independent art consultant. My father, who was a committee member of The Peranakan Association, roped me in to help him with the first issue of the newsletter, which began a new 'career' as a heritage volunteer.

Several relatives had requested photos of the genealogical book, and not long after, I managed a rough translation of the relevant portions. I discovered that our ancestors had come from a region called Tongwu and the patriarch listed as of the first generation in Eng Choon, Lee Say Aik (Li Shiyi, 1618-1667), moved there some time in the first half of the 17th century. He had just one child, Lee Hee Seng (Li Xisheng, 1642-1659) who died at the age of only 17. China was in the throes of civil war at that time. The last Ming ruler, the Chongzhen emperor, committed suicide in 1644 and the Manchus overran the north in the same year. Fujian, whose capital Fuzhou became the seat of the Ming pretender, was conquered by 1646, and the Ming loyalists under the famed rebel known in the West as Koxinga, fled to Taiwan.

It is likely that when the situation became relatively more stable under the new Qing regime, the widow of Lee Say Aik, a Madam Ong (1623-1684), adopted a boy, originally with the surname Tan, as a grandson, and named him Lee Boh Sin (Li Mouxin, 1676-1765). He became a well-to-do landowner and lived to a remarkably ripe old age, during which, because of his fondness for toasted soya beans and the durability of his teeth, he earned the affectionate nickname, 'Old Man Bean'. As for the adoption,



*An old lady leads the way, past rows of uncompleted shophouses, towards the Lee clan complex.*

my uncle Kip Lin with his usual candour, remarked that this could only mean 'we are all bastards'.

Fujian must have been ravaged by all the political instability. Lee Boh Sin's grandson Lee Toon Hong (Li Tunhong) or Lee Kan (Li Kan, 1760-1844) was an ambitious, intrepid adventurer, who left home at the age of 18 to seek his fortune in Malacca, then a Dutch colony, against his family's advice. The Eng Choon Hway Kwan in Malacca has a stone stele with an inscription revealing that a certain Tan Sin Liew was the first man from Eng Choon to arrive in Malacca in the 18th century. Lee Kan must have followed in his footsteps. By the time of the British occupation of Malacca from 1795-1824 (as a reaction to Napoleon's invasion of Holland), he had become a director of the Haikwan Kongs, which assessed and collected customs taxes for Chinese trade in the port.

He married a local Malacca girl, Tan Tuan Neo (acknowledged in the genealogy as his principal wife), produced a son and three daughters and, as was the aspiration of every Chinese man, retired and returned to Eng Choon where he set up home with two new wives, producing many more children, including sons who became scholars. The identity of this first matriarch has always intrigued and fascinated me. The genealogical book gives the name of her ancestral village, Pangsuhau Tau (the location of which I could not ascertain), implying at least that she had a Chinese father. The Peranakan myth of Malay mothers obviously still remained a myth in my family's case, although still a possibility as the identity of her mother remained unknown. The book also recorded that she was buried in Bukit China, but it seems an impossible task to locate her tombstone. It was frustrating not to know anything more about her, and her identity was to remain a mystery for another decade.

Her Malacca-born son, Lee Chan Bee (Li Zanmei, or as in Dutch records in Malacca, Lie Tjan Bie, 1801-1849), held on to the family wealth but it was his sons who made names for themselves. He had eight of them, and named a large estate he owned in Cheng, in the outskirts of Malacca, *Puet Kia Suah* ('Eight Sons Hill'). His eldest Lee Quee Lim (Li Guilin, 1824-1890) was an influential businessman who founded the Eng Choon Hway Kwan in

## FEATURE



Right: Group photo of members of the Lee clan from Singapore and Eng Choon.

Below: Teatime at the clan house.



Malacca in 1867 and seemed to have led a lavish lifestyle with a seaside villa in Klebang, which he often lent to the Sultan of Johore. His funeral, reported in *The Straits Times*, was conducted with great pomp and ceremony. Two brothers became well-known businessmen in Singapore, Lee Cheng Ham (Li Qinghan) and the youngest, Lee Cheng Yan (Li Qingyuan). Another brother Lee Cheng Hui (Li Qinghui), wrote in Chinese for the local Chinese paper, *Lat Pau*, founded by See Ewe Lay (Xue Yuli), the nephew of Lee Quee Lim's wife, See Ai Neo (Xue Ainiang, d.1910), who was a daughter of a Malacca and Singapore tycoon, See Hood Keh.

His son, my great-grandfather Lee Keng Kiat (Li Qingji, 1850-1916), studied at St Xavier's Institution in Penang and was one of the earliest Babas educated in English. He moved to Singapore in his youth, most likely as an agent for the family shipping concern, Keng Yong Brothers, which went bust by the late 19th century. He then found a job as a manager with the Straits Steamship Co. In Song Ong Siang's *History of the Chinese in Singapore*, he seemed by default to have been given the role of presenting the speeches in English on behalf of the

community. Most of his colleagues, such as his cousin Tan Jiak Kim, spoke only Baba Malay. He was also a committee member of the Straits Chinese British Association, whose first president was Tan Jiak Kim. His brother-in-law Koh San Hin subsequently became president. A street in Tiong Bahru is named after him.

Lee Kan's descendants continued to play a part in the commercial, social, political and cultural life of Malaya, and subsequently of Singapore and Malaysia. Many of the Lee girls were married into other prominent Peranakan families. Among his descendants are Lee Keng Liat of Malacca (founder of the Malacca Peranakan Association), Lee Choon Guan, Tun Tan Cheng Lock, Chee Guan Chiang, the writer and playwright Felix Chia, the poet Robert Yeo, composer Dick Lee, actors Lim Kay Tong and Lim Kay Siu, actor Nicholas Lee (of 1990s TV series *Under One Roof* fame), *Singapore Idol* 2004 finalist Christopher Lee, stockbroker and restaurateur Desmond Lim, and founder member of the new Australian Peranakan Association, Alfred Chi.

But of course Lee Kan's descendants have had their fair share of shame and scandal too. Listening in on conversations with the elders I have learnt of embezzlements, jail terms, suicides, several illicit affairs between family members (of different generations even!), compulsive gambling, and even battling siblings (adults, mind you) chasing each other round the dining table.

But back to 1995. Silk Air was already flying directly to Amoy (Xiamen) from Singapore. The era of Deng Xiaoping's reforms was charging ahead in full force, even though he had officially retired, and despite the Tiananmen Square protests six years earlier. We arrived in Amoy on Saturday, 23 September 1995, a time of the year when the weather is pleasantly cool. Surprisingly, the city seemed largely unchanged and the first day was spent touring the museum and temples. A minibus to Eng Choon was arranged for the next morning, and this time the journey took five instead of 12 hours! Fujian's

economic progress was more evident in the countryside. The entire hinterland seemed to be under construction! The landscape was a frenetic, chaotic building site, a hive of ceaseless activity — and we were traveling on a Sunday!

The vistas of misty velvety mountains seen from the old road to Eng Choon seen on my first trip were this time blocked by endless, hodge-podge rows of carelessly conceived shophouses, many of which were not yet complete. The roads had become severely pot-holed with the massive number of trucks and lorries plying the route, and the pavements were littered with mounds of brick and quarried stone, and rubbish. The mist was certainly still evident, but clearly had unnatural origins.

I was distraught. This was no longer the idyllic ancestral homeland. The traditional landscapes seem to have been obstructed and obliterated; Maoist China too had clearly vanished. In its place was so much change and ugliness. Was this really progress? Would these rows of shophouses be China's new great wall? I was convinced they were visible from the moon! So much seemed to be happening and one could not but feel uncertain and uneasy about what future lay in store. Luckily I did not have to manage the expectations of the family, who were all, in typical Singaporean fashion, cheerfully busy on the minibus with peanuts and conversation.

**M**y mother, always the ringleader, kept everyone in high spirits with humorous banter, and was seated in the front with the driver, making it a point to talk to him the entire journey to keep him alert. I felt very sorry for him! My father, as always, remained like a smiling, silent Buddha, happy to let my mother take centre stage. He did not say much, but I knew he was very proud to be on this trip to visit his ancestral homeland, something that would have been inconceivable in his younger days. They are like chalk and cheese in many respects. From her I learnt courage and imagination. From him, wisdom and circumspection. But they both share a great love for life and for people. I constantly aspire to be like them, generous in giving their time and effort in helping others.

When we arrived in Eng Choon, I was thrown into utter confusion — the county town was totally and alarmingly unrecognisable! It was a drab, muddy mess. We asked the driver to stop the vehicle so I could make enquiries. Incredibly, the first person I approached, a tiny, energetic old lady with a shopping bag and umbrella, said she came from the very Lee clan house in Dalutou I was looking for. As usual, a crowd soon gathered around us, and as our minibus was full, a motorcyclist volunteered to give her a lift and lead us to the house. He stopped before a row of shophouses and beckoned us out of the minibus. We followed him somewhat doubtfully, across roadside puddles, then concrete pavements through a gap between the houses, and lo and behold — behind the shophouses was indeed the Lee clan complex that I remembered so well.

Being a member of one of the households, the old lady scurried indoors and in no time we had an impromptu tea party. As with the previous trip, benches emerged and piping hot *oolong* tea was served, and a crowd of residents formed. Communication, as always, was difficult. But soon enough I managed to find out that the old man who owned the genealogical book had sadly passed away. His son




*The owner of the genealogical book (right) with me and a clan elder.*

had kept it safely. Almost a decade had passed since the first visit, and thankfully photocopying machines had found their way to Eng Choon. We separated from the group and took the minibus to the nearest shop, where he allowed me to make a precious copy of the entire book.

Our hosts showed us round the clan complex. We learnt that members of the clan occupied the entire hamlet and that there were estimated to be about 500 Lees living in the vicinity! Everyone was filled with pride and a sense of fulfillment and achievement to have come 'home' after so many generations. Of course we kept to ourselves our deep gratitude to our dear ancestor for leaving a family behind in Malacca! My Uncle Kip Lin, an architect and architectural historian, was particularly busy taking photographs of the buildings. His pleasure was of great pride to me, as he was such an important role model for me. His passion for history and heritage, and the purity of his academic interests, are a great source of inspiration and motivation for me.

**W**e had only planned a day trip, so the time spent at the clan house was short, as we had a five-hour journey back to Amoy. We said our goodbyes and presented a collective monetary gift to the families 'for the maintenance of the ancestral shrine'. The sun began to set, soon after departure, and it was unnerving to travel in the dark. Halfway, the minibus ran over a nail and we had to change a tire. There were suspiciously too many tire repair shops, and everyone felt that we had become victims of a new and unwelcome breed of provincial Chinese — the country con-artist!

Never one to let a bad situation ruin a holiday, my mother came up with a fabulous idea. She has always had an infectious enthusiasm for a good meal and an almost miraculous *joie de vivre* that, although it can never turn water to wine, can certainly convince everyone that water tastes like wine. We soon followed her in to the nearest local restaurant and had a magical meal that was as memorable as the trip to the ancestral village. 

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*In the final instalment in the next issue: a request by a family friend to research his family tree leads to the discovery of the identity of Lee Kan's wife, and then to a third trip to Eng Choon in January 2008, when a neighbouring ancestral clan house was visited.*

# NYONYA IN CAMBRIDGE

By Cheng Neo Lee Creswell

AN ARTICLE IN OUR LAST ISSUE ABOUT A NYONYA IN ENGLAND INSPIRES ANOTHER TO SHARE HER EXPERIENCES OF INTRODUCING THE CULTURE TO COMMUNITIES ABROAD

Once a Peranakan, always a Peranakan. Now living in Cambridge, United Kingdom, I am a Nyonya from Malacca and I proudly wear my *sarong kebaya* when the opportunity arises, especially when I am invited to give talks.

One of my earliest memories of Peranakan life was the 12-day wedding of my cousin, Mr Tan Beng Lin in 1953, when my sister was the flower girl. She was shown how to sashay beside the bride in a slow, *lembut* manner. The wedding was not only grand, colourful and stately

but also memorable. The one and only ceremony I was not allowed to witness was the *cheo thau* because the bride's horoscope and mine were not compatible. It was more than 40 years later that I attended the next Peranakan wedding. Although not a 12-day ceremony, it was nonetheless magnificent, especially the sound of the *seroni* music.

These two weddings remain fond memories that I shared with the UK Cambridge Ladies Luncheon Club, of which

I am a member, when they approached me to give a talk in January 2005. My presentation on a traditional Peranakan wedding was supported by slides showing the decorations of the family altar, including the *chanab*, decorated with 'eagle claw' papaya strips held by skewers. The ladies were enthralled by the glorious layered costumes and the numerous jewels on the bride's head piece. *Seroni* music were also played to dramatise the talk. To some of these English ladies who had visited our 'Heritage Museum' in Hereen Street, Malacca, they appreciated our antiques and costumes even more!

I also wear my *sarong kebaya* when I give talks on my batik works. I first held a *chanting* (wax pen used for batik making) in the early 1950s when I learnt the intricacies of drawing with hot liquid wax and found the combination of layering wax and paint not only fascinating but also challenging. My main aim is to explore the versatility of batik and textile art by creating works on different materials with subjects ranging from plants and seascapes to marine life.



During my 27-month stay in Washington DC in 2006-8 when my husband was seconded by the UK government to work there, I was fortunate enough to be invited to hold weekend courses in the Smithsonian Institution. The Martin Luther King Jr Memorial Library in Washington DC, honoured me by exhibiting my silk works in the Capital's library for a month in October 2007. During this period, several workshops followed in various US art centres.

One memorable event was an invitation to speak at the Kuala Lumpur International Batik Conference in December 2007, which was where I met The Peranakan Association First Vice-President, Peter Wee. I felt honoured to have been invited by my peers and to have the opportunity to return to my home country. The speakers came from Europe, Australia, India, Sri Lanka, Japan, America, Indonesia and Singapore as well as from all over Malaysia. The conference organisers have invited me to return and give another talk in December. I am looking forward to be closer to my roots once again. 

Top: Lee Creswell at work on her batik art  
Above: At the batik conference with our First Vice-President, Peter Wee.



Wedding of Tan Beng Lin, 1953. Lee used visuals like these for her talks to English ladies. (Photo with kind permission of Mr B L Tan).

# THE AMULET AND CHILLI PADI

Reviewed by Colin Chee

PUTEH AND ITAM ARE AT THEIR ANTICS AGAIN – IN TWO NEW CHILDREN'S BOOKS

**T**he *Amulet* and *Chilli Padi* complete the series of four very captivating and interesting books about two children in a Peranakan household, written by author Adeline Foo and beautifully illustrated by Lee Kowling. The book series was launched in conjunction with the opening of Singapore's Peranakan Museum last year and written to encourage children to learn about Singapore's Peranakan heritage. The first two books in the series are titled *The Beaded Slippers* and *The Kitchen God*.

If anything, Singapore's very recent and extremely successful Mandarin television series *The Little Nyonya*, about a Peranakan family, should spark intense interest in these books for children.

But *The Amulet* and *Chilli Padi* are good enough reads to stand on their own.

In *The Amulet*, little mistress Puteh helps her grandmother make rice dumplings or *kueh chang* for home prayers during the summer solstice and for a feast. While preparing the dumplings, like all restless and imaginative kids, she gets into a make-believe game with Itam, her boy companion, and loses her protective *tangkal* (amulet).

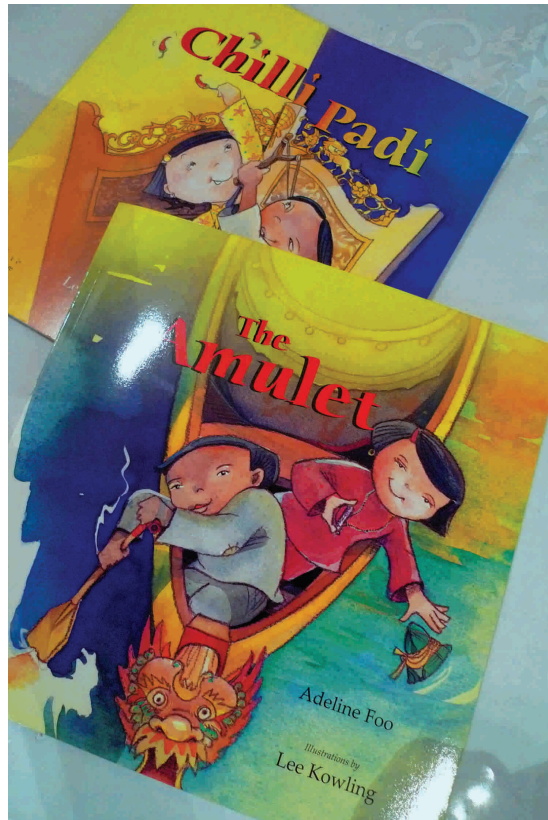
Author Adeline goes into the little details about how to prepare *kueh chang*, like sorting white glutinous rice grains from greyish ones, and then soaking, draining and flavouring them, followed by washing the *pandan* and bamboo leaf wraps and bundling them, and preparing the fillings. I remember doing all this when I was little, helping out my mother and black-and-white *amah* in the backyard of our house in Bukit Timah.

And it helps too that as the story goes along, Lee Kowling's very accurate and cute illustrations of everyday things in a Peranakan home of yore bring to life all that is written.

There is reference to the amulet:

'A cylindrical locket worn on a silver chain, the amulet contained a rolled up piece of paper, a *hu* written on it.'

In those days, amulets were worn by children to protect them against evil spirits. They were worn by both boys



and girls. If a child was sickly or seemed to be troubled by misfortunes, a 'blessed' amulet would be sought from a temple for the child to wear as a necklace.

An especially powerful amulet might come in the form of a mythical dragon fish or an actual tiger's claw.

Puteh's grandmother eventually finds Puteh's lost amulet while eating a *kueh chang*. It is so true in real life too. I recall once finding a 10-cent coin (engraved with Queen Elizabeth's image) buried in a home-made *kueh chang* I was eating. One never knows what else goes into a *kueh chang*!

In the same vein, the second book *Chilli Padi* has Puteh and Itam helping to make *kueh ee* or glutinous rice balls using red and white dough, to be offered

to deities and the family's ancestors.

*Kueh ee* is made to celebrate *Tang Chek* or the advent of the winter solstice. *Kueh ee* is also the first food shared by a newly-wed couple. Sharing a bowl of one red and one white *kueh ee* in syrup flavoured with pandan leaves signifies marital harmony.

In the book, Puteh and Itam get into a fight and mess up the kitchen with ready-to-cook *kueh ee*. Grandma punishes Itam, who owns up to the mess, and rubs broken *chilli padi* onto his mouth. If you know how hot *chilli padi* is, you will appreciate that this punishment is one that you do not ever forget, especially if you are a child. In the book, Itam also calls Puteh *chilli padi* because she is of a small build but with a fiery temperament.

I really enjoyed reading the two books. There are cultural gems to be found within both, including the tradition in Malacca of putting a pair of red and white *kueh ee* on the top corners of a home's main door frame as a means of asking the gods to bless the house in the year ahead. ☞

*The Amulet and Chilli Padi* are written by Adeline Foo and illustrated by Lee Kowling. Published by Ethos Books. Available in good bookstores.

# FATHER

ROBERT YEO SHARES RECOLLECTIONS OF HIS FATHER, YEO KOON YAM, IN THE SECOND OF A TWO-PART EXTRACT FROM HIS NEW BOOK.

My other photograph of father (below) was very likely taken in the premises of the old YMCA in Orchard Road where he used to coach and of which he was a member. He is completely at ease, standing there in the middle, with the broadest smile.

His ability as a player probably created a demand for his coaching services; his knowledge was also put to use in purchasing and installing tables for clubs.

These were his written instructions to coaches:

*How to improve your Billiards: 3 or 4 Ball*

**IMPORTANT – Half Ball in offs (Losing Hazards)**

*Winning Hazards (Potting)*

*Addressing the ball, holding the cue, stance -Preliminary cue action, final delivery, cue must go through the ball.*

*Follow through, Screw, Stun and Stab shots, Forcing shots, Sides - Top and bottom*

*3 important phases of the game:*

- Centre pocket in offs
- Drop cannon shots
- Top Table play-pots and cannons

However, in 1961 he had to write to the YMCA general secretary, Mr Roland Lyne, to resign. Drawing a relatively low salary of \$300 a month with a new company, he felt he could not afford the luxury of continued membership. Mr Lyne persuaded him to remain, as after all, 'Your membership costs you not more than \$20/- a year, \$18/- if you pay in one payment.' It seems likely that with reduced salary and waning interest in the game, he may have resigned.

Father died on 10 July 1962 in the morning in hospital. A heart attack took him suddenly. My uncle Koon Kim broke the news to me that evening. I was reading when he approached me; he had a strange look on his face I had never seen before when he mounted the steps of 5 Valley Road. He held me tight. I was too shocked to react. I was to go to the Toa Payoh Hospital the next morning to identify father's body so that funeral preparations could begin.

When the attendant brought him out of what looked like a big refrigerator, I choked. His corpse was enclosed in ice and his eyes were wide open as if death had caught him unaware; he looked stiff but there did not appear to be evidence of the struggle of *rigor mortis*. I cried openly.

The Author's father, Yeo Koon Yam (fifth from left), with YMCA members, 1950s.



I signed a piece of paper identifying him and went home numb.

Some time later, I wrote the following poem:

## NIGHT

*That night he died  
Begatting throbbingly untimely tears  
That swept our emptier but heavier home,  
  
I could not weep.*

*It seemed from empty heart  
Like droughty stone  
None could wring tears:  
I could not see the loss.*

*But when I saw his stiffened clay  
Soulless as sod  
Colder than the cold room  
And death-bewildered eyes,*

*A heart-drawn tide surged unabashed;  
Tears swiftly drench my tactless moons.*


*Oceanic heart  
What swelling tides you hide!*

I was drawn to write about him again, in another unpublished poem called 'Elegy'. Some lines help me to recall his cremation and consecration:

*We picked his scattered bones that Sunday noon,  
Picked them with care, picked them for the urn...*

His ashes are now in an urn in a Buddhist temple in Jalan Senyum. Years later, I published another poem questioning why he was given a Buddhist burial when, all his life, he was not a practicing devotee. Entitled *In a Temple*, it appeared in my second book of poems *And napalm does not help* published in 1977. Obviously, father's death was agonising, as these searingly candid lines disclose:

*But do we hold it against them that when they lived,  
They carried on as non-Buddhists?  
Surely a religion must be lived  
That we may deserve to die faithful?  
Unless sudden, death's a preparation  
to be imbibed. What could be learnt by those  
who found a faith when convenient or in haste  
desperate, or had it, unknown, professed for them?*

Dying relatively young, at 52, my father was not able to enjoy seeing his children grow up or be a grandfather at least. He died intestate, his work unfinished. Mum kept home, my sister was in university and my two younger brothers in school. Fortunately, I had just graduated and financially, at least, I was able to step into his shoes. 

*Extracted from Robert Yeo's memoir, Routes: A Singaporean Life, 1940 - 1975, published by Singapore University Press.*

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## EVENTS

# BRING ON THE BABA BLING!

By Linda Chee


OVER 300 PIECES OF PERANAKAN JEWELLERY WILL BE ON DISPLAY AT THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM FROM 29 MAY 2009, AND WHAT A SHOW IT WILL BE!

**B**aba Bling: *The Peranakans and Their Jewellery* will feature heirlooms from the collections of families in Singapore, Malacca, Penang, Indonesia and Sarawak. Highlights will include 12 sets of kerosangs and other adornments from head-to-toe, including pieces from the early 19th century.

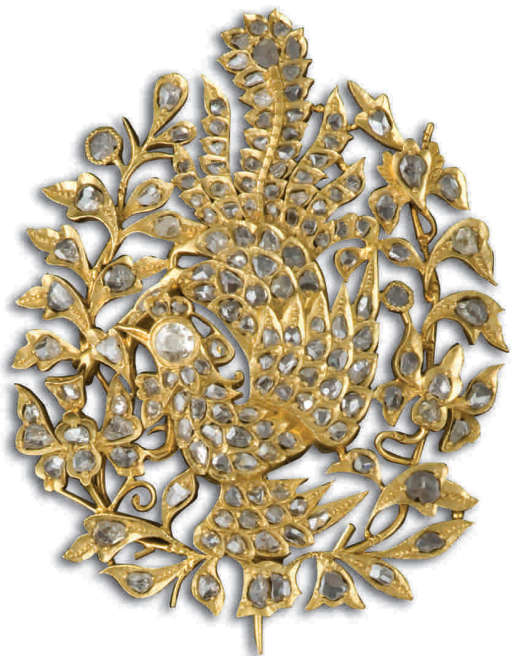
Visitors can see the intricacies of pieces with Burmese, European, Indian and Chinese influences. The exhibition will go beyond to show jewellery boxes and garments to illustrate how the Peranakans wore them. For the first time, the Museum will bring out its collection of antique jewellery moulds that were acquired long before from shops in Singapore; moulds used by skilled craftsmen of yesteryear to shape pendants, *kerosangs*, amulets and even the *ganchu terompak* (slipper knobs) of the footwear that the ladies gripped between their toes.

'Bling it On!' is a two-day open house on 6 and 7 June that will feature a Peranakan jewellery-making demonstration by a master craftsman from Foundation Jewellers. Visitors will be treated to music by a *dondang sayang* band in the lobby and interesting craft activities for families with young children.

The exhibition will be on for at least five months. Other programmes include a monthly series of speakers including gemologists, academics and experts presenting a variety of topics related to the culture.

The Museum, which is the only one of its kind in the world, has been a runaway success since its opening a year ago. To-date, more than 240,000 visitors - from the young to the silver-haired - have crossed its threshold. 

*Photographs courtesy of The Peranakan Museum*



Gold and diamond kerosang, Early 20th century, Penang, On loan from Dr Ho Pui Sun, Collection of Mrs Quah Hong Chiam.



A set of six gold and diamond hairpins, Late 19th to early 20th century, Penang, Gift of Edmond Chin.



1. Gold and diamond brooch, Late 19th to early 20th century, Singapore, On loan from Peter Wee.

2. Gold belt and buckle, Early 20th century, Singapore.

3. Silver and pearl hairpin, Early 20th century, Malacca.

4. Silver and mother-of-pearl belt, Early 20th century, Penang On loan from Dr Ho Pui Sun, Collection of Ms Quah Quee Tin.

Singapore Pools thanks **The Peranakan Voices** for supporting  
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## EVENTS

# ONE TO REMEMBER!

by Emeric Lau

THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM CELEBRATES ITS FIRST ANNIVERSARY

It was a weekend of extremes, and the weather seemed to underscore that sentiment. Saturday, 25 April saw a ferocious sun shining mercilessly down on the Peranakan Museum and the tent that had been put up alongside to house a food and craft *BaBazaar*, while visitors on Sunday were prey to a massive afternoon thunderstorm that inundated several food stalls and The Peranakan Association's booth with rainwater.


Nonetheless, the party went on, with practically non-stop, equally diverse entertainment throughout the two days. Veteran act Frances Hogan and Friends surprised everyone with an unexpectedly irreverent series of skits that saw Frances in a tighter-than-thou *baju Shanghai*, and his comedy partner Reggie breaking into a rendition of Kylie Minogue's pop hit, *Can't Get You Out of My Head* with rainbow feather duster *a la Amah*! Main Wayang and Gunong Sayang Association ramped up the crowd-pleasing spectacle with full casts taking to the stage in traditional colours – resplendent *Nyonyas in Kebayas* indeed, to quote a title of a Main Wayang song. The Peranakan Voices swayed and charmed with their renditions of traditional Peranakan oldies, Rumah Bebe staged a fashion show on behalf of The Peranakan Association, while inside the museum building,

Vocaluptuous delighted with live *acappella* arrangements of their hits. MediaCorp artistes Jeanette Aw and Pierre Png of *The Little Nyonya* fame sashayed in on Sunday, before hurrying off to prepare for the Star Awards later

that evening, where, as predicted, the hit drama serial won through. In the Ixora Room, live demonstrations of batik-making, beading and *kebaya*-making allowed everyone a peek into just a few of the painstaking arts behind Baba material culture. Evergreens from the Peranakan community, national stars, traditional and contemporary, classic and modern – this intense two-day event was all-inclusive.

Having only opened for a year, the museum appears to have achieved the aim of introducing Peranakan culture to the world – standing at the doorway for 10 minutes, in addition to Malay, Mandarin and English, I also discerned conversations in French, German, Thai, Japanese, Vietnamese and more – it

was a truly international crowd, all clamouring to experience something Uniquely Singapore.

Three cheers to the Peranakan Museum on its success. This is definitely ONE event to remember! 



Museum Board Chairman Priscylla Shaw and Director Kenson Kwok cutting the anniversary cake.

Left: Jeanette Aw and Pierre Png of *The Little Nyonya* blockbuster wow the crowds at the Babazaar.

Photograph courtesy of [www.theeventsagent.com](http://www.theeventsagent.com)

Right: Merrymaking Peranakan Style.



## EVENTS

# UN-LIBRARY@ESPLANADE:

by Claire Seet

AN INFORMAL FORUM ON WHAT IT MEANS TO BE PERANAKAN

17 April 2009. 7pm. A small group gathered to engage in an informal forum organised by the Library@esplanade. A cozy space was created, flanked by a waterfall, a cafe, the other two sides being open, suggesting an openness to share ideas and discuss what it means to be Peranakan.

The forum was part of a series labeled *unLibrary*, hosted by the National Library Board as an experiment to reshape the library's landscape through the change in dynamics seen from the Library's different visitors. *unLibrary* was hosted by local playwright Baba Alvin Tan, who is the artistic director of a leading local theatre company called The Necessary Stage.

The evening started with our Peranakan Association First Vice-President Peter Wee explaining the Peranakan material culture. He shared interesting nuggets and anecdotes about the kitchen being the stomach, or *perot*, of the house, a special space in the Peranakan



home where the Datok Dapor (Kitchen God) resides because it is the place where the five elements of life (fire, water, earth, wood and metal) representing man and the universe, are present.

From Left: Babas Tony Quek, Peter Wee and Alvin Tan.

Professional actor Baba Tony Quek introduced to the audience the intricacies of cross-dressing in Peranakan plays as the matriarch. It was the first time he had spoken on this topic. Tony also related on how a wealth of fashion accessories was built up for use by the matriarch.

Alvin Tan in turn, shared on how being Peranakan and its sensibilities had influenced his theatre practice. He summed up with his realisation that being Peranakan is about interaction with other races, not just mere co-existence, interracial and not multiracial. It is a fusion of cultures, a hybrid of the Chinese diaspora, which he likened to the Merlion as an example. Hardly a purist, Alvin clearly showed an all-inclusive attitude. He pulled out a recent photograph of his high school reunion – a Chinese, an Indian and a Eurasian posing together – a portrait of a unique Singapore, where the fabric of cultural identity is so clearly interwoven. Which brought us back to the open-ended discussion about our present journey towards the future of the Peranakans, or should I say, being Singaporean.

And you know what? I am glad to be part of it. ☺

For the recorded *unLibrary* discussion, please go to: <http://peranakan.org.sg/videos/>



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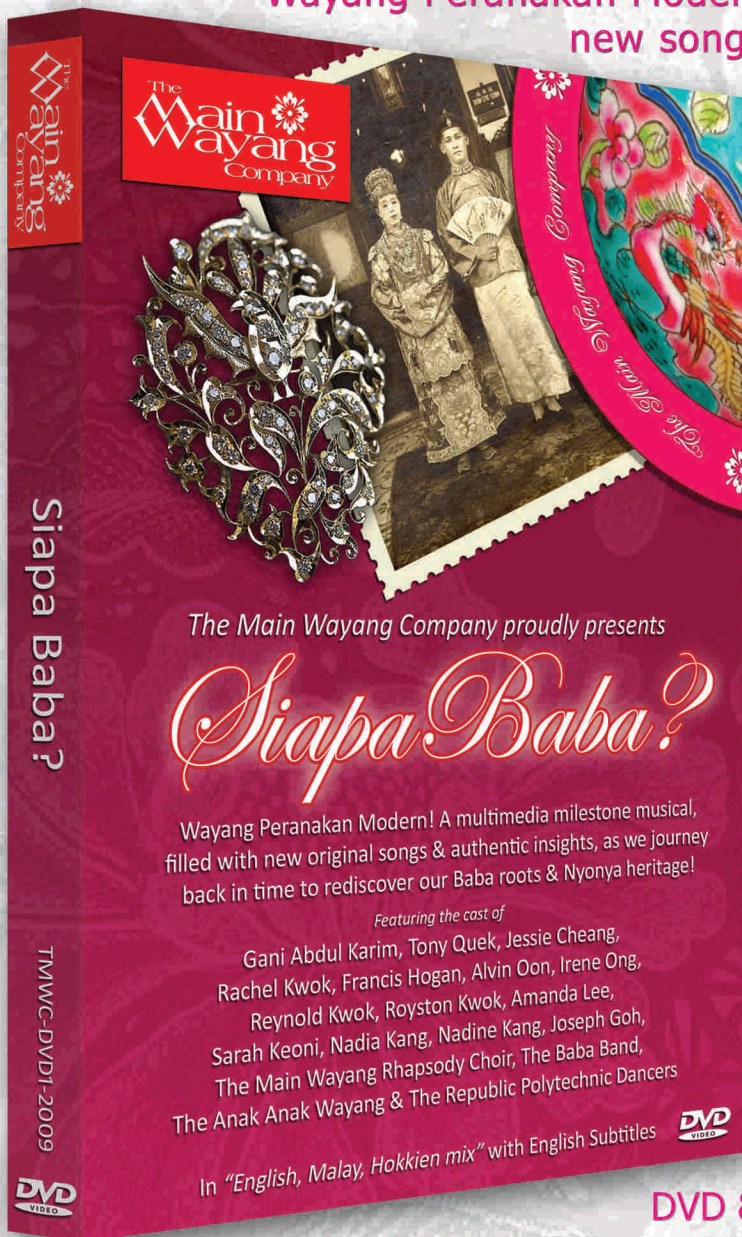
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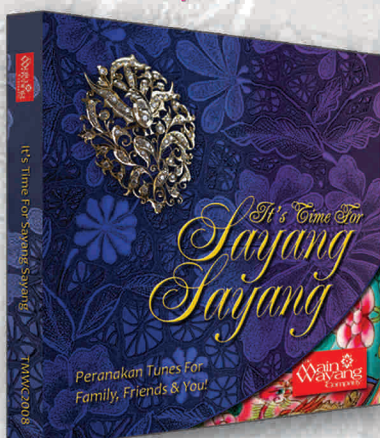


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## EVENTS

# CHAP GO MEH MERRY-MAKING IN PENANG

By Alvin Oon

The State Chinese Penang Association invited The Main Wayang Company to guest star in their *Chap Go Meh* 2009 celebrations in Georgetown, Penang. This much-publicised annual affair attracts thousands of locals and tourists to the event venue at the Esplanade.

With a team of eight singers and musicians, Main Wayang travelled to the performance venue in grand style in the traditional *Dondang Sayang* bus, a brightly-lit vehicle adorned with *bunga manggar* and lanterns, reminiscent of how Singapore's Chingay street parades used to be in the past. Upon arrival, our entourage was greeted by thousands of spectators and performers including lion dancers and



giant flag pole pugilists in a sea of excited photographers.


To live music by a four-piece Malay band, our group merrily started the *joget* party on the red carpet. We kicked off the evening's entertainment with a rousing number, *Happy Together Kita Hua Hee* (We are Happy), followed by the swinging *Nyonyas In Kebayas* song, both of which are Main Wayang's own compositions. It ended with a joint performance of *dondang sayang* by Bibik Francis Hogan, accompanied by dancers from the Penang Association. Everyone then proceeded to Evergreen Laurel Hotel for a more intimate hour-long performance.

Francis Hogan (middle) and friends performs the *Dondang Sayang*.

The hosts and members of the Penang Association were so pleased with Main Wayang's musical collaboration that its President, Dato Seri Khoo Keat Siew, has already invited our group to return for the next Chap Go Meh performance in 2010!

The *Dondang Sayang* bus.







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## EVENTS

# THE FIRST PERANAKAN FESTIVAL IN JAKARTA

By Peter Lee

Left: A display of the altar for the household deity at the *Bentara Budaya*.

Right: The *Bentara Budaya*'s exhibition hall with one of the highlights: a red-and-gold wedding bed.



Jakarta's, and perhaps Indonesia's first Peranakan Chinese exhibition, was held at the *Bentara Budaya*, the exhibition hall of the Kompas newspaper office complex from 15 to 25 January 2009. Entitled *Warisan Budaya Tionghoa Peranakan*, the show was enthusiastically received. It created great excitement among the Peranakan Chinese community there and among art collectors and historians. The organisers were a newly-formed heritage association, *Komunitas Lintas Budaya Indonesia*, together with Kompas,

A wide range of objects used and made for the Peranakan Chinese community were on display, on loan from several Jakarta collectors. These included furniture, costume, textiles, jewellery, silver objects and even a rare *gamelan* set belonging to the family of a high ranking officer from Lasem. Also seen was an elaborately carved red-and-gold wedding bed belonging to a family from Padang, Sumatra, which was according to family tradition, ordered from Penang.

An excellent photographic exhibition on the architectural heritage of the Peranakan Chinese occupied the upper level of the hall, showcasing rare gems such as a 17th

century house in Tangerang that was tragically demolished. The town is also the site of another recent tragedy – the flood caused by the bursting of the local dam.

The gallery also hosted a short film festival over two days, showing four films concerning the Peranakan

community, *Ca-Bau-Kan* (The Slave Girl), *May and Babi Buta Yang Ingin Terbang* (The Blind Pig that Desired to Fly).

A new book was launched at the opening in conjunction with the show, *Peranakan Tionghoa Indonesia: Sebuah Perjalanan Budaya* (Chinese Peranakans of Indonesia: A Cultural Journey). Co-published by Intisari and



Exhibition panels at Grand Indonesia mall.

*Komunitas Lintas Budaya Indonesia*, it is a hard-cover treat with 352 pages of photographs and essays in Indonesian.

At the same time, a small Peranakan exhibition was held at the new wing of Grand Indonesia mall, in conjunction with the Chinese New Year celebrations. In one of the open areas of the cavernous mall, a row of exhibition panels introduced the Peranakan heritage in Indonesia. The mall also organised a small fair, with booths selling contemporary batik from Lasem and confectionary. ☞

# PENANG'S LATEST MUSEUM: HOUSE OF YEAP CHOR EE

By Peter Lee

On 16 October 2008, a new heritage museum in Penang opened its doors to the public. The House of Yeap Chor Ee at 4 King Street, houses the furniture and artefacts from Penang's grandest pile, Homestead, the mansion of the banking tycoon Yeap Chor Ee (1867-1952) at Northam Road. Yeap Chor Ee founded Ban Hin Lee Bank in 1935. Following a national policy to merge Malaysian banks, Ban Hin Lee was not able to maintain its independent status and has become part of a larger entity, CIMB bank.

Homestead was built for Yeap Chor Ee in the 1930s. When the mansion (more like a palace, with its own private theatre) was donated to the Wawasan Education Foundation and became the Wawasan Open University, the Yeap family moved the mansion's contents to a row of houses that were Yeap Chor Ee's residence before he moved to Homestead. Known as *Kau Keng Choo* (Nine Houses), it has been converted to a gallery and memorial to the family founder. A restaurant, Sire, occupies the ground floor and serves contemporary Western cuisine.

Penang's political elite and prominent members of



*Interior of the House of Yeap Chor Ee.*

the Peranakan community were in attendance at the launch, hosted by Datuk Stephen Yeap, the grandson of Yeap Chor Ee, his wife, Datin Irene, and their daughters.

*Photographs courtesy of House of Yeap Chor Ee and Daryll Yeap.*



*Left: Datuk Stephen Yeap presenting his welcome address.*

*Right: Datin Irene Yeap (second from right) and her guests.*

# THE PASSING OF A NATIONAL TREASURE

By Peter Lee

INDONESIA'S PANEMBAHAN HARDJONAGORO, A CULTURAL ICON AND A PERANAKAN BY BIRTH

**P**anembahan Hardjonagoro, perhaps the last surviving batik master from the Sukarno period, passed away in his native town of Solo on 5 November 2008.

An expert and a keeper of the heritage of the royal courts, Hardjonagoro, who was bestowed with the rank of Panembahan (one of the highest noble titles) by Susuhunan Pakubuwana XII, was born Go Tik Swan, a Peranakan Chinese, on 11 May 1931. His maternal great grandfather was a Lieutenant of the Chinese community in the town of Boyolali. His grandfather Tjan Khay Sing was a batikmaker in Solo who employed up to a thousand workers. Another great grandfather was a Lieutenant of the Chinese in Solo.

As a student in the elite colonial *Neutrale Europese Lagere School*, he befriended the children of the town's elite, including a prince who later became the Susuhunan Pakubuwana XII of Solo. They remained lifelong friends. He studied dance in his days at Universiti Indonesia and performed for President Sukarno, who was captivated by the idea of an ethnic Chinese youth immersed in Javanese culture, and immediately included the young man in his inner circle.

In 1954, encouraged by the President who was eager to articulate a new national batik style and who was aware of his family's batik making heritage, Hardjonagoro produced his first collection of batik, which was inspired by the phoenix motif. Immediately the Presidential court



*Panembahan Hardjonagoro standing before his portrait in the living room of his house in Solo, November 2007.*

and all its ladies began to wear the new batik. The rest, as they say, is history.

Iwan Tirta, batik doyen of the later Suharto era, and said by some to have been a bitter rival, has acknowledged Panembahan Hardjonagoro as his mentor and guru, and as a key figure in the development of modern Indonesian batik, drawing influences from all the cultures of the republic and reinterpreting them in an expressive and new way. 'Without these bold steps taken by Go Tik Swan, the batik of Java might never have evolved into what is now known as batik Indonesia: batik that takes inspiration from everywhere and belongs to all the people of Indonesia.'<sup>1</sup>

*A 1950s batik from Hardjonagoro's famous first series with its sawunggaling (sparring phoenixes) design.*



Hardjonagoro was also a renowned authority on Javanese culture, especially all its most arcane and mystic aspects, and a great collector of textiles, the *kris*, the *gamelan* and sculpture. He was honoured with many national and royal awards and was an advisor for several important cultural institutions in Indonesia. Fluent in Indonesian, Javanese, Dutch and English (but not Chinese), Hardjonagoro, or Mas Go, as he was known to many, was a

famed raconteur, remembered for his acerbic wit. He entertained visiting national and international leaders, often in his own art-deco period house with its renowned collection of Indonesian treasures.

'I met Mas Go on my visit with my wife - Alit Djajasoebrata - to Java in 1970,' remembers Harmen Veldhuisen, the renowned Indonesian textile authority who lives in the Netherlands. 'We stayed in his house; he was an excellent host. We went out for meals – he knew the best places, which were often simple *warungs*. His batiks were fascinating: top quality, new designs but all with a courtly style. The VIPs in Jakarta, international collectors and museums were all willing to pay high prices. With Alit he discussed the philosophy of batik patterns. With me, about Who's Who in Whatland. He loved to gossip. He was also a connoisseur of Javanese art and, what is not known, an important dealer.'

He was at one time married to another Peranakan Chinese pioneer of Batik Indonesia, Nora Yap. He had not been in the best of health the last few years, having suffered a stroke, and leaves behind an adopted family, headed by a prince of the court, Hardjosoewarno, who continues his batikmaking and cultural legacy. 

1. Iwan Tirta, 'Where Have All the Butterflies and Phoenixes Gone?', in Judi Knight-Achjadi & Asmoro Damais, *Butterflies and Phoenixes: Chinese Inspirations in Indonesian Textile Arts*, Mitra Museum Indonesia, Jakarta, 2005, p. 13

## NOTICEBOARD

### WELCOME

The Association welcomes our new life members:

1. Ms Louise Bell
2. Ms Patricia Chan Mei-Hsing
3. Mr Keith Chee
4. Ms Olivia Chee
5. Ms Veronica Chee Hui Ling
6. Mr Aaron Chong
7. Mr Ronnie Chua Chin Koon
8. Mdm Grace Chua Siok Lin
9. Ms Magdalene Chua Guek Lian
10. Mr Steven Chua Kian Boon
11. Mr Heng Jor Dan
12. Ms Beverly How
13. Mr Dennis Lee Chin Keng
14. Mr Lawrence Tan
15. Mr William Tan Yew Hock
16. Mr Jenson Johan Tay
17. Mr Lawrence Wee
18. Ms Melissa Wee Cheng Lian

### OBITUARY

Our deepest sympathies to the families of Mdm Rosy Soo Gek Lian and Mr Peter Soh Poh Min upon their demise.

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# 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.

### **Baba Bling: The Peranakans & Their Jewellery,**

29 May - 13 December 2009, Tan Tsz Chor Gallery. Showcasing over 300 jewels from the museum's own collection as well as from families and private collectors in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, the exhibition commemorates the museum's first anniversary. On display will be rare, early pieces from the 19th century and even some outstanding contemporary pieces.



**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 heritage house at 157 Neil Road opened on 4 September 2008. Go back in time to 1928 and experience what a grand Peranakan terraced 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. *Baba House 157 Neil Road, Singapore. Tel: 62275731. Visits are by guided tours. Please call the house for details.*

<http://www.nus.edu.sg/museum/baba/index.html>

**International Conference. Peranakan Chinese in Globalising Southeast Asia: The Cases of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia,** Friday 22 May 2009, 9am - 5.30pm, Possibility Room, National Library Building, \$30 each person (\$15 NUS, NTU students) inclusive lunch and 2 teas. Jointly organised by Baba House, NUS Museum, and Chinese Heritage Centre, with the cooperation of the National Library Board. This is the first academic conference of its kind in Singapore. For enquiries: call Baba House or email [babahouse@nus.edu.sg](mailto:babahouse@nus.edu.sg). Details at [www.nus.edu.sg/museum/eflyers/22May\\_Conference-Main.html](http://www.nus.edu.sg/museum/eflyers/22May_Conference-Main.html)

**The Creative Role of Hybridity in SE Asian History,** Wed 3 June 2009, 7.00pm - 8.30pm, NUS Museum, University Cultural Centre, Free Admission. In this lecture, Prof. Anthony Reid examines the roles of Sino-Southeast Asian commercial groups in the 14th-16th centuries, an exceptionally fluid period when the region's modern identities began to form (though not yet to harden) into mutual exclusivities. Hybridity or biculturalism appears to lie at the heart of the creation of city-states like Melaka, Patani, Palembang, Manila, Brunei, Surabaya and Cirebon, and also at the origins of the cultures we today call Malay, Javanese and Chinese Peranakan or Mestizo. Details at [www.nus.edu.sg/museum/eflyers/3June09\\_Hybridity.html](http://www.nus.edu.sg/museum/eflyers/3June09_Hybridity.html).

**Of Fingerbowls & Hankies: Chris Yap voyeurs through the Baba House,** 25 June to 31 December 2009, The Gallery, 3rd level, Baba House, Visits to The Gallery only are free and By Appointment, Tel: 6227-5731 Email: [babahouse@nus.edu.sg](mailto:babahouse@nus.edu.sg). Artist and photographer Chris Yap explores what it means to be 'Peranakan' in our contemporary world. Using photography and installations, traditional



Peranakan culture is juxtaposed against daily life and experiences, resulting in artworks that are visually captivating and thought-provoking

**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>*

## 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/SGA/design\\_studio/dds2b/blair/study/Blair.html](http://www.arch.nus.edu.sg/SGA/design_studio/dds2b/blair/study/Blair.html).

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

**Katong and Joo Chiat.** Perhaps the nerve centre of Peranakan life in Singapore. In its heyday it was the site of nearby 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.**

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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