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1 /Baba Convention *28th – 29th November*

Hotel Royal @ Queens with *Bedrooms* - a play included.
This is a 2-day event where delegates from the region will gather to present and discuss various Peranakan issues spanning its rich heritage through to present-day matters. To register, please contact babaconvention@peranakan.org.sg

2 /Babazaar - a food and craft fair *28th -29th November*

SMU Concourse 11am – 6pm
Catch new "live" musical entertainment from various youth groups. Exquisite cuisine prepared by several cultural groups, and Peranakan food and craft stalls some 40-strong. please contact design@peranakan.org.sg to register.

3 /Peranakan Ball *28th November 2009*

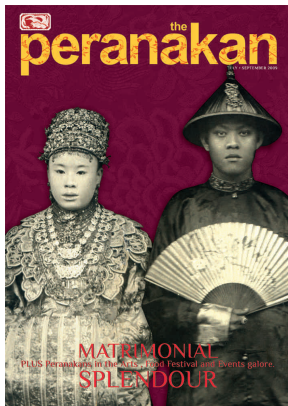
Swissotel The Stamford 7pm- 11pm
The Peranakan Association's annual D&D will be held on 28th Nov at Swissotel The Stamford. Limited tables, please contact geek@peranakan.org.sg for reservations.

4 /Bedrooms - the play *25th November- 6th December*

University Cultural Centre Theatre, NUS
A new play in both English and Baba Malay
25 - 29 November 2009 - *Bilek Roda Hidop* directed by Zizi Azhar
1 - 6 December 2009 - *Bedrooms* directed by Alvin Tan
For more information, contact: bedrooms@peranakan.org.sg

5 /New Baba Art Exhibition *28th November – 6th December*

SMU Concourse 11am – 6pm
Featuring Peranakan-themed works of young, emerging artists specially produced for sale during the Festival. For more information, email exhibitions@peranakan.org.sg



Back cover photograph courtesy of Dr Maurine Tsakok

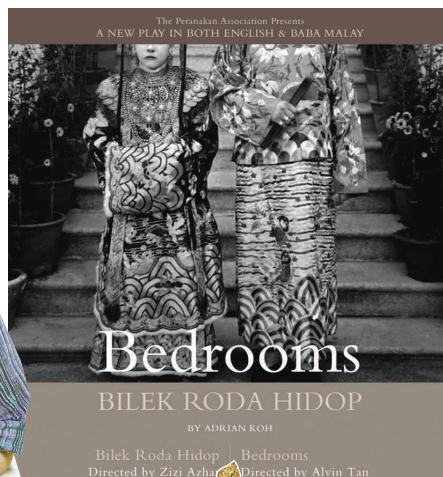
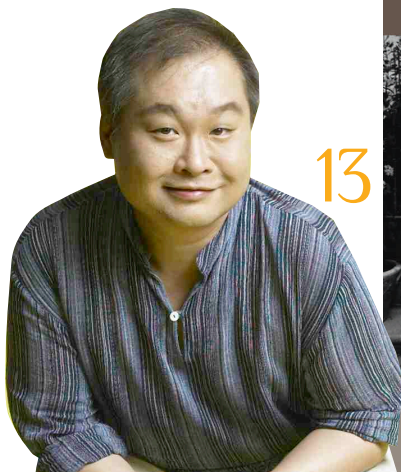


THE
PERANAKAN
ASSOCIATION
SINGAPORE

www.peranakan.org.sg

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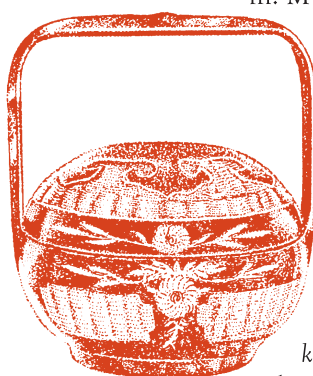
THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE *Editorial Advisers:* Lee Kip Lee, Peter Lee • *Editor:* Linda Chee • *Art Editor:* Ian Yap • *Assistant Editor:* Emeric Lau • *Designer:* Michelle Yap • *Advertising Manager:* Alvin Yapp • *Administrative Manager:* Low Whee Hoon • *Editorial & Photography Committee Members:* Colin Chee, Ee Sin Soo, Jason Ong, Claire Seet • For advertising please contact Alvin Yapp at 93382234

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MATRIMONY AND ALL THINGS PERANAKAN

To most women, a wedding is a once-in-a-lifetime experience when one is the princess for the day, romance is in the air and all is perfume and roses.

To the nyonya, the wedding is indeed an experience. The big day when she is fussed over, with *kim pohs* and *mak kohs* suddenly appearing from nowhere advising on every superstition she never thought her Christian mother-in-law would believe in. My own wedding nearly 30 years ago, the



first in my family, was just that. No wearing of my wedding gown twice, no widows entering the matrimonial bedroom, but thankfully, no chickens under the bed to see which would appear first, male or female, to denote the gender of the forthcoming grandchild. Dowry? "I'm not selling my daughter," was the admirable retort from my dear father. Ours was a *kahwen kek beng* (modern-style wedding),

dispensing with much custom though the tea ceremony was essential in paying respect to our elders and asking for their blessings.

It wasn't so easy for brides in *kahwen dulu kala* (traditional Baba-style weddings). Full of pomp and rife with ritual, the Peranakan ceremony stretched over an arduous 12 days that must have taxed the young nyonya's emotions if not burdened her, literally from the heavy headdress and layers of bridal costumes to the hours of ceremonies she had to endure. I have a photo of my paternal grand-

parents who went through the *kahwen berarak* (with procession) in Malacca, Ah Kong Ayer Leleh (because he lived in Ayer Leleh) looking dapper in his tuxedo. But they passed away when I was a young child and I never had the chance to hear stories from them.

While mama married into another well-to-do family, there were brides who were not so fortunate. In this issue we look at marriages of urgency in dire wartime circumstances, weddings through the generations that turned out well and also how you can adapt some *dulu kala* practices and get married Peranakan-style.

The last quarter has been chockful of Peranakan happenings. Just look at the hectic schedule of engagements for our Peranakan Voices choir, the Singapore Food Festival which goes Peranakan this year, and the hugely popular Baba Bling exhibition at the Peranakan Museum. Coming at year's end: a new Peranakan play called *Bedrooms*, timed for the Peranakan Festival and directed by the driving force behind *The Necessary Stage*, Baba Alvin Tan, who is interviewed in this issue.

This year our culture proudly marches for the first time as a contingent at the National Day Parade and we have moved up notches in the celebrity circuit, 'rubbing shoulders' with Elvis Costello, Deepak Chopra and Sir James Galway at the International Sun Festival!

Read too, about what our young Peranakans are up to. Better still, join them. ♣

Cheers

Linda Chee

LETTERS

I enjoy reading your magazine. I am a historical-fiction writer and I wrote a children's novel called 'Little Pioneers' which was launched in March 2005 and is now obtainable at Borders and MPH bookshops. I am in the midst of another novel now and needing information on the *seroni* band as part of my research.

- Bessie Chua

Peranakan cultural expert and author of A Baba Malay Dictionary, William Gwee Thian Hock, replies: "The musical instruments associated with the traditional Baba *seroni* are as follows: two Chinese clarinets of different sizes (*seroni besar* and *seroni kechik*), a bamboo flute (*suilin*), a pair of cymbals, a Chinese drum, a smaller Chinese drum with a brass piece attached, and a Javanese metal gong. There are normally four or five musicians, and a violin is not used."

Your publication and its contents have improved by leaps and bounds. Hopefully you can have recipes on nyonya *kueh*, including *Apom Bok Kwa*, with photos, and feature nyonyas in sarong kebayas.

- Wilson Tan

Editor's reply: Thanks for the kind feedback. If you could refer to back copies, Dalam Dapor had a recipe for *Apom Bok Kwa* in the Oct - Dec 2007 issue and ways to wrap the sarong in the Jul - Sep 2008 issue. All issues are also online at www.peranakan.org.sg. We are equally eager to have more fashion spreads, so do look out!

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WHEN BABA MEETS NYONYA

Courtships and marriages in Baba Norman Cho's family

The Peranakan Wedding

The pomp and pageantry of the 12-day Peranakan wedding ceremony is legendary. It probably evolved from simpler forms and culminated in an elaborate ritual at the pinnacle of the economic boom in Southeast Asia from the 1880s to 1920s. It was the Golden Era for the Peranakans whose socio-economic status permitted the refinement of their customs and practices. The wedding customs varied between regions and families across the Straits Settlements and Indonesia. Over time, it further evolved into frills-free Western-style because of modernization.

Since much has been documented about the rituals of the 12-day wedding ceremony, I shall instead share a few stories of courtships and marriages in my family that spanned several generations. These reflect peculiar customs practised by the early Peranakans.

Maternal Ancestors

My maternal ancestors originated mainly from Malacca. Great-great-great grandfather, Chan Whye Cheok (1848-1926), worked in Kim Seng & Co. in Malacca from the 1880s to 90s. The company was small and consisted of about seven staff. He became acquainted with his colleague, an office clerk, by the name of Yeo Hoon Swee (1869-1937). Impressed by the diligence and good nature of this educated young lad, he approached the parents of Hoon Swee to arrange for the marriage to his daughter, Chan Geng Ean. The wedding took place in Malacca and was most likely in the form of the 12-day wedding. Sadly, since photo-taking was not fashionable then, we have no souvenirs from that ceremony. The union produced three sons and three daughters.

My great-grandfather, Yeo Cheow Ann (1899-1982) was their youngest son. The family moved to Singapore around 1900 when Chan Whye Cheok bought a house at 431 Havelock Road. Hoon Swee found employment in Hooglandt & Co. and later bought his own house at 28 Everton Road in 1909. Chan Whye Cheok had 2 daughters, but only Geng Ean married. In order to perpetuate his Chan surname, he adopted his eldest grandson as his own son. Thus, Yeo Cheow Poh became Chan Cheow Poh. This practice of adopting one's eldest maternal grandson to perpetuate the family name seemed to be common amongst Peranakan families.



In 1921, Yeo Cheow Ann was arranged to be married to Tan Imm Neo (1907-1962). Up till as late as three months to this planned marriage, 22-year-old Cheow Ann had never seen her or even a photograph! All he knew was that she was a nice girl who had been well raised by another Peranakan family. He was both excited but worried. What if he did not like her or if she had a terribly pock-marked face? His worries proved unfounded when he saw this demure young lady on their wedding day, resplendent in her bridal finery. Her face was as smooth as porcelain. He fell in love with her immediately! For reasons uncertain, the wedding ceremony was held at the residence of the groom's grandfather at 431 Havelock Road, as evident from the wedding portrait. I suspect that this was at the request of the old man who wanted to augur good fortune to his home by hosting a joyful event.

Therefore, contrary to common belief, the wedding ceremony need not be held at the home of the bride.

One interesting feature in their wedding portrait

The marriage of Yeo Cheow Ann and Tan Imm Neo at 431 Havelock Road in 1921.



Yeo Bee Teck was only 15 years old when she was married off to Hong Ah Eng in 1942.

was the words painted on the wedding lantern (to the right of the picture). If the ceremony was held at the residence of the bride or the groom the word, *Chen Fu* (Tan Residence) or *Yang Fu* (Yeo Residence) would normally be painted on the lanterns respectively. However, due to the unusual circumstance, the lantern read *Yang-Chen* (Yeo-Tan). Both the surnames of the wedding couple were used in place of the actual residence,

which was *Chen Fu* (Chan Residence). The groom was dressed in Manchu court robes, worn with a Manchu official's hat, complete with braided queue and Chinese boots. This manner of dressing was preferred if there was a *kahwen berarak* (wedding procession). The practice of capturing the wedding moments in the form of wedding portraits became fashionable with the Peranakans from the mid-1910s onwards. Truly, such pictures paint a thousand words!

My maternal grandmother, Yeo Bee Teck (1927 – 1982) was the eldest of Cheow Ann's three children. In 1942, she was rushed into an arranged marriage out of extreme anxiety when the Japanese invasion of Singapore became imminent. Great-grandfather had heard that the chastity of maidens in Malaya was ruthlessly taken away by the invading army, and quickly found a local Chinese rickshaw-rental towkay (businessman) to marry Bee Teck. It did not matter that he was not a Peranakan even though marriage within the community had always been the preferred choice; at that point, the crucial thing was that the prospective groom was healthy and economically able to support his wife and family. Thus, 15 year-old Bee Teck was whisked into marriage to Hong Ah Eng (1915-1963), even though she was ignorant of the birds and the bees. They were married in a simple wedding ceremony,

dressed in the Western wedding attire of that period. Their union produced four wonderful children. Interestingly, the marriage made my grandfather more "Peranakan" than my grandmother "Chinese". This was not surprising since grandfather came to live with his Peranakan parents-in-law as he came from China and had no family in Singapore.

My mother, Estelle Hong Kim Lian, was born in 1947 and by her time, arranged marriages were obsolete. Her bashful nature did not create much opportunity for her to mingle with members of the opposite sex. Therefore, great-grandfather had to seek the help of his well-connected Peranakan friends (mainly mahjong-kaki) to leave word that the family of a very eligible nyonya maiden was looking for a suitor for her. Great-grandfather then arranged for several eligible Peranakan bachelors to meet her at home, under his watchful eyes. She was given the liberty to make her choice but found no one suitable.

Some bachelors were also put off by great-grandfather's endless interrogation, which could be both intrusive and direct: "How much do you earn?", "Can you afford to take care of my granddaughter and raise a family?", "How many girlfriends do you have?", etc.

Then in 1968, a mahjong-kaki introduced the son of her ex-cherki-kaki, who came to visit my mother with his mum. This lad became my father, Charles Cho (b. 1935). Thankfully, great-grandfather spared him the questioning and my mother had no negative feelings towards him. Over the next few days, great-grandfather discreetly sent his agents to check out my father's background, from his employment status to his character. This was achieved by interviewing his friends and colleagues. They were allowed to date each other initially with a chaperon but later went unescorted. It wasn't love at first sight but they grew fond of each other over a period of one year. Typical dates comprised going to the movies or chats over a meal.

They were married in 1970 in church.

Paternal Ancestors

My paternal great-grandfather, Cho Boon Poo (1860s-1932) also known as Cho Poo, was married to my great-grandmother, Kong Moy Yean (1860s-1935). They were both Peranakans of Malaccan stock. Cho Poo had three wives, of which my great-grandmother was the third. It was fairly common for wealthy men in those days to have more than one wife for various reasons, for example, should the first wife fail to produce male heirs to pass down the family name. Adoption was also very common under such circumstances. In fact,



Cho Kim Leong and Yeo Koon Neo were allowed to date before they married in 1934.

Cho Poo adopted all of his five sons for his three wives. My grandfather, Cho Kim Leong (1902-1945) was the only son adopted for Moy Yean. It is not known when my great-grandparents were married but it was likely in the 1880s and in the manner of the 12-day traditional Peranakan ceremony. They lived at 151 Heeren Street in Malacca till 1932.

My paternal great-grandfather (from his mother's side), Yeo Lye Heng (1860s-1922), was a Peranakan from the Riau Islands. He settled in Singapore as a trader and married my great-grandmother, Tan Chwee Neo (1875-1957), a Singapore nyonya. They had 14 children – 7 sons and 7 daughters. My grandmother, Yeo Koon Neo (1913-1995), was the 13th child. They were probably married in the 1890s in the traditional Peranakan style. They resided at 674 North Bridge Road.

The marriage between my grandfather, Cho Kim Leong, and my grandmother, Yeo Koon Neo in 1934, was not strictly an arranged one as they were allowed to go on dates. Koon Neo's mother and her *cherki-kaki* who were good friends, decided to find husbands for their daughters when they came of age. Both their daughters were of the same age and naturally became the best of friends. The two elder ones left word in the *cherki*-playing circle that they were *charek kia-sai* (looking for a son-in-law). Grandmother's only request to her mother was that she wanted a Peranakan husband who was educated and could take care of her as she was illiterate. Cho Kim Leong was introduced to

grandmother's friend and a certain Lee Yong Teck was introduced to my grandmother. However, in a twist of fate, it was discovered that both Kim Leong and his new-found date shared the same surname "Cho". The quick-witted elders decided on a quick-fix solution: why not swap partners, as both men were equally eligible? They did not know that the two Cho families had different ancestries – my grandfather was Hokkien while his new-found date was Cantonese. Therefore, even though the spelling in English was identical, the Chinese character differed.

While present-day couples go on dates privately, my grandparents dated each other with their coupled friends in tow. They went for trishaw rides, watched movies, strolled along the Esplanade and chatted over meals. The closest physical contact that my grandfather had with grandmother was holding her hand. Even then, she was bashful initially and retracted hers. They were married less than a year after their first date. Grandfather immediately whisked her off to Malacca where they settled for two years, before grandmother convinced him to relocate to Singapore at 421 Joo Chiat Road. They had two sons. My father was the elder. By then, most Peranakan couples opted for a Western-style wedding. It was less elaborate and less costly. However, the fashions in Singapore lagged behind those of the West by almost a decade. You would notice that in their wedding portrait the gown and veil were those popular in Europe in the 1920s. A marriage certificate was not compulsory either.

My grandparents solemnized their marriage at the ancestral altar, witnessed by family members. The colonial government recognized such marriages as legal and binding.

Addressing family members A basic guide

Father: *Bapak, Baba, Tiah-tiah*
Mother: *Mak, Nya-nya*

Father-in-law: *En-kwa*
Mother-in-law: *Neo*

Grandfather: *Kong-kong*
Grandmother: *Ma-ma*

Great-grandfather: *Kong-cho*
Great-grandmother: *Ma-cho*

Grandchild: *Choo-choo*
Great-grandchild: *Chi-Chik*
Great-great-grandchild: *Oneng-oneng*

Other Interesting Peranakan Practices

It is a well-known fact that many wealthy Peranakan men practised polygamy. They would marry a wife and have several secondary wives (*gundek*). Sometimes, these other wives would be slave-girls who had won the favour of the master.

Yet another bizarre practice was that of marrying the younger sister of a deceased wife. This practice was called *ganti-tekair* (replacing the mat). How the mat analogy arose remains a mystery. Yet, there is a practical reason: such a step-mother, who was also the aunt to the children, would probably not ill-treat her kin. The illustrious Tan Jiak Kim married three sisters in succession, upon the death of each wife! ♣

THE CHEEN CHUEY WEDDINGS OF WARTIME PENANG

Baba Christopher Lim recounts how some poor Penang nyonyas were married off to their wealthy father's labourers

My maternal grandmother, Nyonya Wong Kim Swee, told me many tales of old Penang. I recall a tale about well-to-do Peranakan patriarchs returning to their ancestral villages in Fujian province to visit their ageing parents, country wives, children and clansmen. They would also ensure that their Nanyang-born male offspring were brought up according to Chinese custom so that they would uphold the family name, traditions and retain their Chinese identity while living in a foreign land.

Patriarchs would also recruit workers from their ancestral village or neighbouring villages to help administer their businesses back in Penang or in other cities like Medan, Phuket and Rangoon. (In my family's case, it was Perak and Kuching.) To get to the "land of gold", these new workers had to brave the perilous sea journey. In return, they were guaranteed employment, accommodation and an opportunity to seek their fortunes. These newcomers or *sin kek* had to work hard to eke out a living in order to send money home and earn the trust of their new employer before finally returning to their villages to enjoy their retirement.

With the onset of World War II, Peranakan families found their circumstances abruptly plunged into turmoil. They were also viewed with suspicion by the Japanese warlords.

Penang Peranakan families found *Cheen Chuey* marriages useful in the face of such adversity. The fear of marauding Japanese troops hurried them into arranging marriages for their unmarried daughters, who were viewed as liabilities. It was necessary to avert any damage to the good name of the family and the possibility of leaving the poor lass unmarriageable if she ever found her way home after she was abducted by the Japanese invaders. At all costs, each family wanted to save its genealogical honour.

Within this method of matrimony, the patriarch's daughter would be hurriedly married to a trusted employee, who would be less wealthy, and probably



Drawn by Peter Lee, inked by John Lee

much older than the bride-to-be. Yet who better for the employer to trust his daughter(s) with than his own employee(s)? As employer, the patriarch could keep tabs on worker relationships too!

Consequently, the patriarch would bear the cost of the wedding and the newly-weds would live in the comfort of the patriarch's home. However, any offspring from this matrimonial union would usually bear the patriarch's family name.

I have not seen photos of such matrimonial arrangements; pre-war Peranakan arranged marriages usually had the newly-wedded couple photographed on the front porches of their respective family mansions for all to admire.

Satisfaction from the *Uuanh Chanh* and "Good Morning" towel

In *Cheen Chuey* marriages, the family did not view the groom's status as equal to its own. It also

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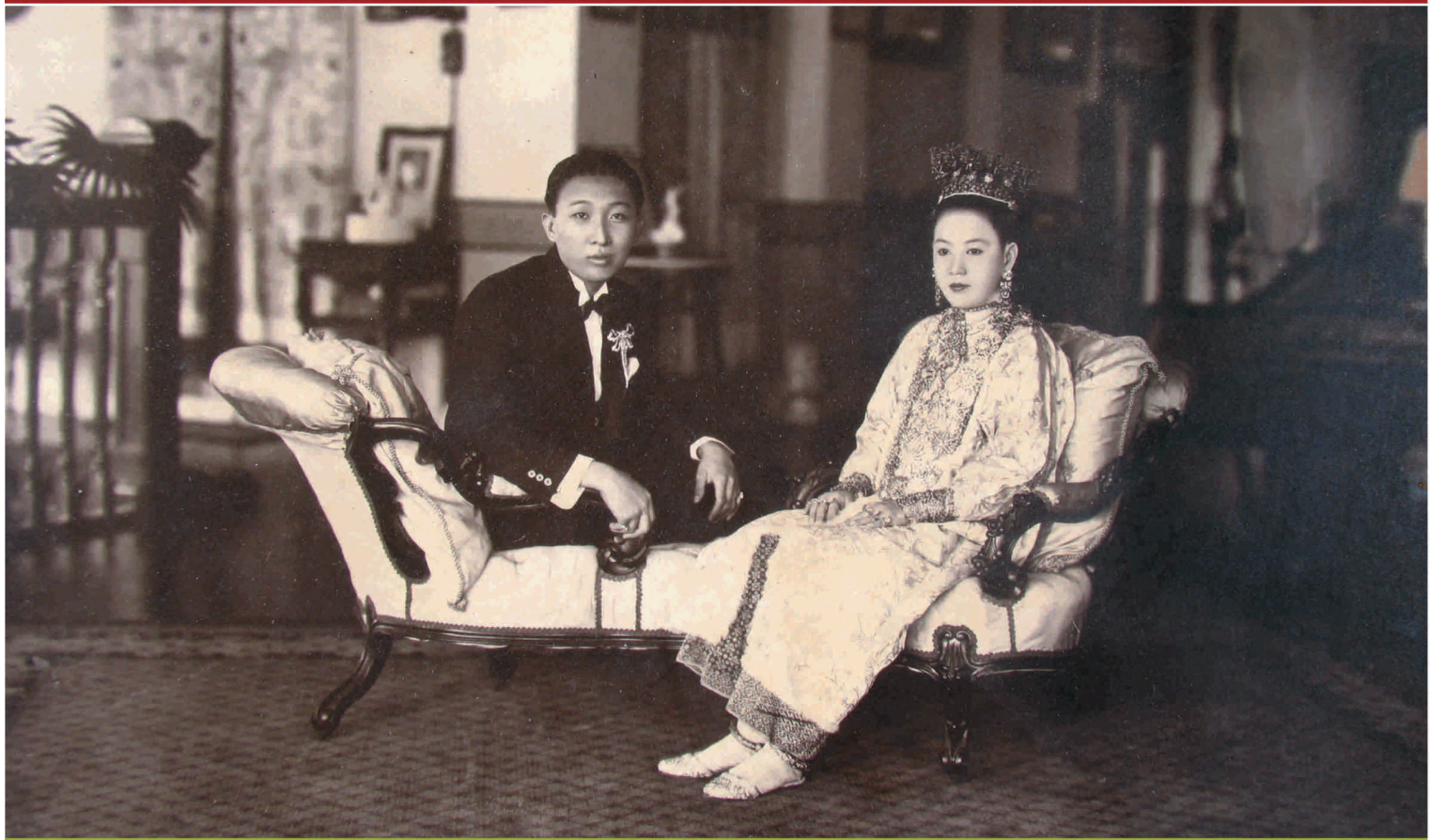
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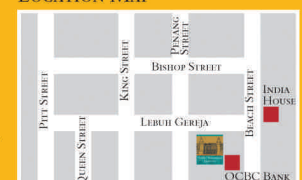
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LOCATION MAP



FEATURE

meant that there was no chance of building an alliance with another competing family's business through marriage. All this was reluctantly accepted for expediency's sake.

Although officially living in the patriarch's family home, the new son-in-law was expected to leave the home in the wee hours of the morning during the first month of marriage. He could return to the workers' quarters or begin work earlier. At midday, his lunch would be brought to him at his workplace by the family chauffeur in the *uuanh chanh* (tiffin carrier or 'tengkat'), together with a slightly damp 'Good Morning' white towel.

Usually, the dishes consisted of meat, seafood, vegetables and steamed white rice. If he had enjoyed the tiffin meal, he was expected to wipe his mouth with the towel and leave the soiled towel on top of the *uuanh chanh* unfolded, giving the indication that he loved the food and expected to have the same dishes again. Should the towel be unused and neatly folded, it was an indication that he wanted a change of dishes.

Triple invitation to return home

At the end of the work day, the family's chauffeur would return to fetch the son-in-law home. The chauffeur would invite him back home, and in return he would decline it. The chauffeur would render a second invitation and he would decline it again. Only when the chauffeur gave a third invitation would he accept and be shown to the car.

By the end of World War II, many Penang Peranakan families had lost their fortunes and were in decline. These families did away with burdensome traditions, or scaled them down.

Many sons-in-law of *Cheen Chuey* marriages then set up homes at the workers' quarters with their wives and children. Such marriages indeed saved some nyonyas from shame as they were respectably married and upheld their families' honour. Of course, *Cheen Chuey* is no longer practised. ♣

Today, selected workers' quarters that took the form of clan jetties (a unique form of housing built on stilts that originally housed workers of the same clan) located in the proximity of Georgetown's Port Swettenham harbour in the area of Weld Quay are listed as sites of the World's Historical Heritage.

THE COLLECTION OF KATONG ANTIQUE HOUSE

Nyonya lady dressed in baju panjang and pekalongan batik sarong



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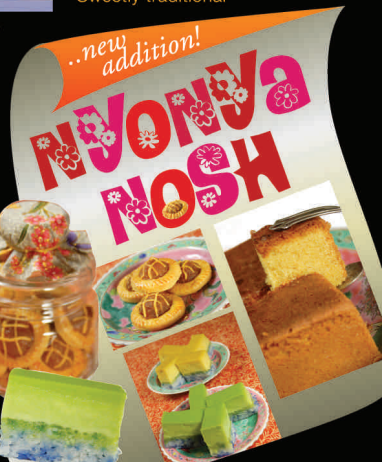
Sweetly traditional



Wedding costume rental



Kasut Manek Vogue



A BABA WEDDING

Colin Chee reviews the reprint of Cheo Kim Ban's classic and its relevance to modern-day weddings

I am glad for this reprint because not many first prints are in free circulation.

Since its publication in 1983, Cheo Kim Ban's book became at some point the preferred reference guide for Peranakan families when planning a wedding in Malacca and Singapore.

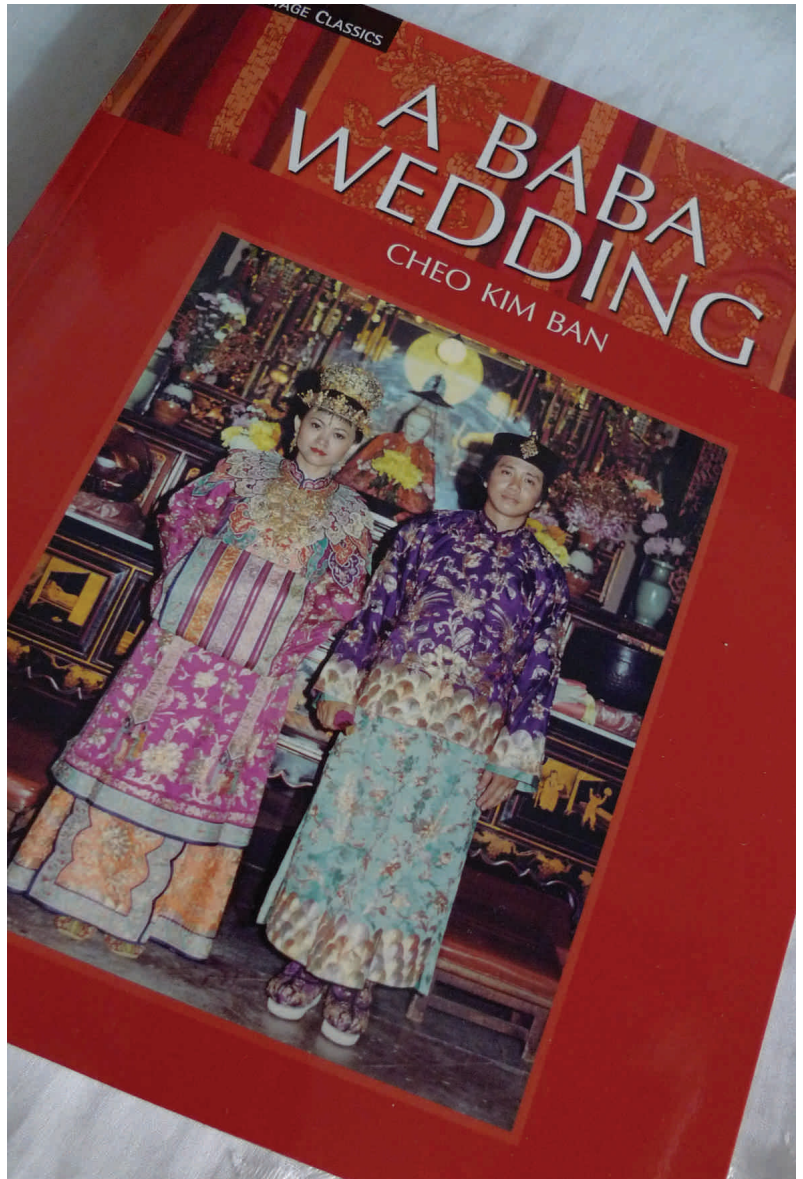
However, one could wonder just how useful such a wedding reference will be in this day and age.

For a start, we really don't have the luxury of time for the extended traditions and rituals. Many of our young are also practising Christians who may not go through some of the ceremonies that a traditional Baba wedding would require. And where are we going to source those costumes, jewellery and wedding paraphernalia even if we were to decide to have one?

But hesitation does not make the very detailed book any less interesting than it is. If anything, the book gives the reader a very comprehensive and helpful perspective of what Peranakan weddings were like years back. We can still adapt some of those practices and rituals for use today.

There are just too many to mention but here are some gems I'd like to highlight:

- It was customary for the bridegroom-to-be to personally deliver invitations to wedding guests. It would be invitation cards to friends and associates. For relatives, a more formal invitation would take the form of *kueh ih*, small red (for luck) and white (for purity) glutinous rice balls boiled in syrup.
- When the house was being prepared for a wedding a red bunting or *chye kee* would be hung above



the main door of the house. The mid portions of the drapes on either side of the door would then be tied into bows to form *bunga teratehs* or lotus flowers. Of course, if you have family lanterns, these three lanterns would be hung up in front of the main door.

- The bridal chamber could be perfumed with *stangee*, a local incense made from various roots and barks, sugar cane and sugar, and also with *bunga rampay*, a potpourri of finely sliced sweet

smelling *pandan* leaves mixed with petals of flowers and perfume.

- The bed could also be cleansed and blessed by a young boy from a large family with living parents. He would roll across the bed back and forth three times. But the boy's horoscope should not clash with the wedding date and hour of the ceremony or misfortune would befall him.
 - Below the bed would be placed a low earthenware pot filled with clean sand along with a comb of bananas or *pisang raja* (for wealth), lemon grass or *seray* (for longevity) and yam tuber (for fertility). Three lit joss sticks would also be stuck in the pot.
 - As for the groom's gifts to the bride's parents, the customary leg of pork with a beautiful red paper cut is a must, amongst other items like jewellery.
 - And of course, *seroni* music to accompany the groom's procession to the bride's home.
 - The rituals surrounding the wedding ceremony, much of which are related to Taoist worship, are too painstakingly detailed to enumerate here.
- However, one of the most holy and important of elements in the wedding ceremony is the *Chiu Thau* or purification rite and initiation into adulthood. The groom would be advised by an elder of the family his duties as an adult, a husband and responsible member of the family. Only when the groom nods his understanding and acceptance does the *Chiu Thau* ceremony begin. One of the more symbolic and emotional rituals during *Chiu Thau* for the groom would be when his mother for the last time braids a red thread into the groom's queue. The bride would also undergo a separate *Chiu Thau* ceremony which would include a ritual in which her hair would be combed and arranged into a *sanggul Chiu Thau*.
- The next most important element in the Peranakan wedding ceremony is the *Chim Pang*, when the bride meets the groom for the first time (in the old days marriages were match-made). This is also the day the bride is given away by her parents to begin her married life. Not surprisingly, the ceremony is even more colourful than the *Chiu Thau*.
 - The third and also an important element of the Peranakan wedding ceremony took place on the third day. Called *Sah Jit*, it is the day the groom and bride show their respects to their elders as a couple.

According to the author, the last known fully traditional weddings complete with sedan chair and ceremonies was held in Malacca in 1953. Traditional weddings could stretch up to 20 days of feasting and ceremonies.

However, abridged versions are still held today in which various key ceremonies are telescoped into a few days. These include the *Chiu Thau*, *Chim Pang* and *Sah Jit* ceremonies. These are held, more often than not, within one day. Sometimes, a nominal Twelfth Day celebration is held on the sixth day when *nasi lemak* is served along with *sambal serunding* (to symbolise discussion and consultation). When the *sambal* is served it means there is harmony and agreement in the match. You see, this is the day when proof of the bride's virginity on the night the marriage was consummated is established. The proof is in a blood-stained one metre length of white cotton cloth which the bride's mother would invite the groom's mother to examine.

Kim Ban's book is a pleasant revelation for readers who are interested in the Peranakan heritage and also those who would like to adopt some elements of the traditional Peranakan wedding into their own.

Good Luck! ♣

A Reprint in 2009 by Marshall Cavendish Editions,
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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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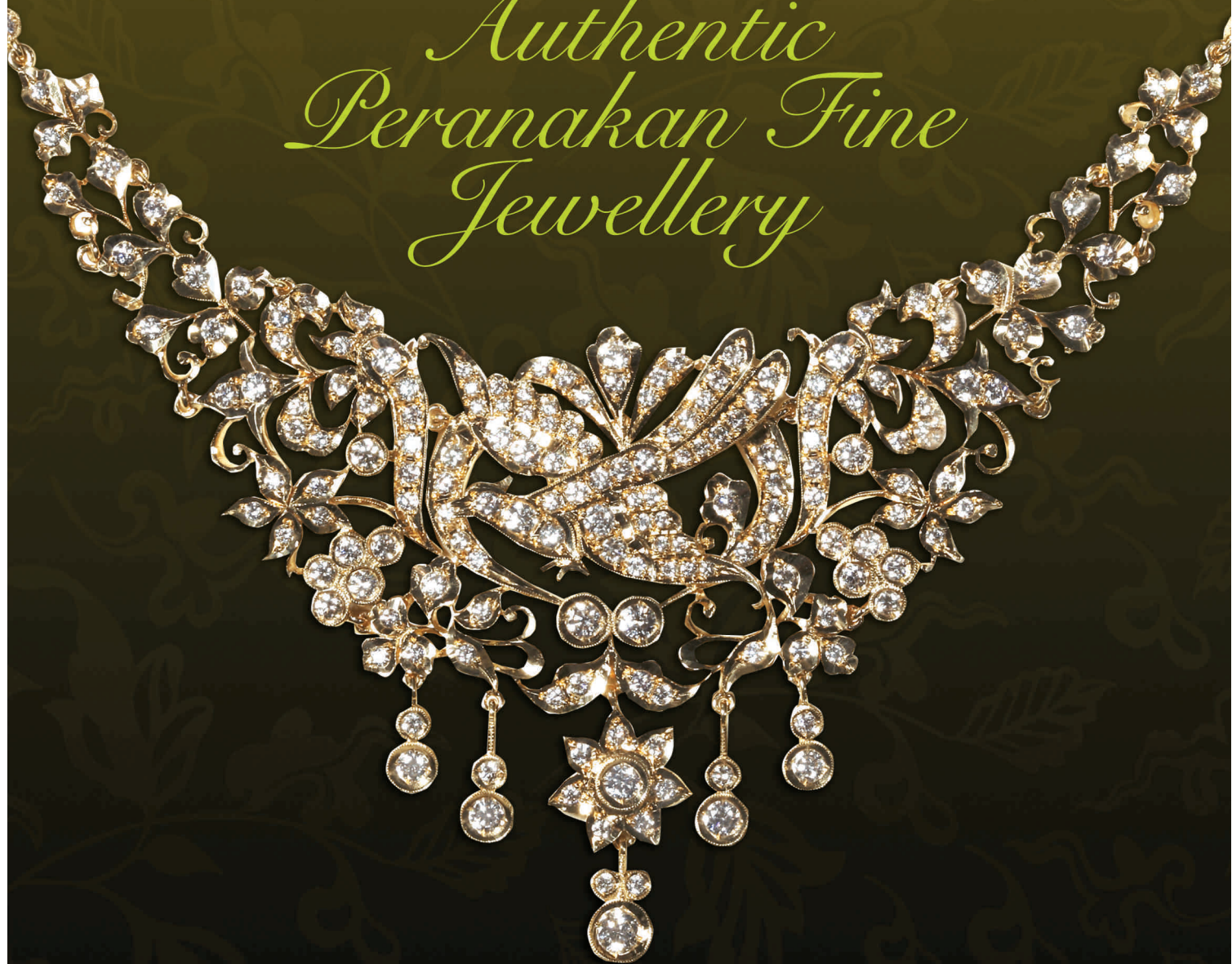
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LOCAL SAGE, INTERNATIONAL STAGE

Colin Chee checks in with Baba Alvin Tan, veteran theatre practitioner, about his dreams and challenges

Baba Alvin Tan is the Artistic Director of The Necessary Stage (TNS), one of Singapore's top Arts companies. Established in 1987, the company has mounted over 60 original theatre productions. Its mission is to create challenging indigenous and innovative theatre that resonates with both our Singapore audience and international audiences. TNS has undertaken works in Banda Aceh, Berlin, Birmingham, Busan, Cairo, Dublin, Glasgow, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, London, Macau, Melbourne, New Delhi, Seoul, Sibiu, Sziget, Taipei and Tokyo.

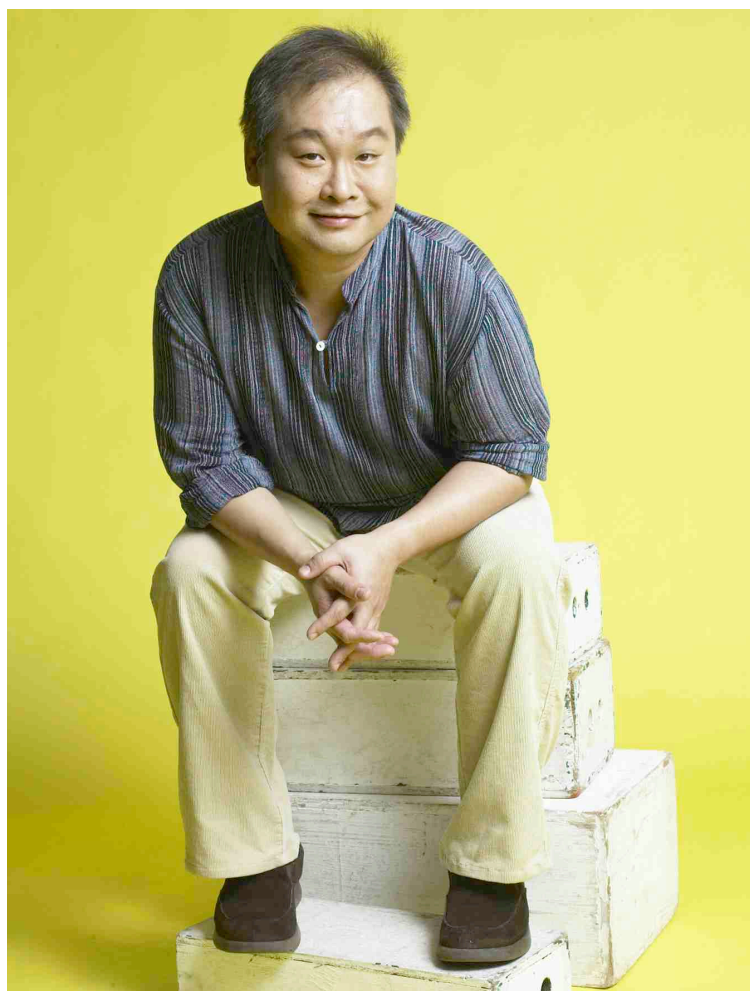
Whatever drove you to start a theatre company in the 80s? I mean, could anyone make a living out of theatre then, especially when Singapore was just into one of its deepest economic downturns?

It was my interest in Literature that initiated me into theatre. I was an English Literature major at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and I found myself frequently reading the footnotes when studying Shakespeare. I had to read these additional notes to access the cultural contexts in order to appreciate the bard. Then I wondered, if we included 'ancestral worship' in our plays, would our western counterparts have to read footnotes to uncode our cultural allusion? That spurred me on to pursue theatre full-time in the 90s.

I started TNS as an undergraduate during my 2nd year at NUS in 1987. As I was still an undergrad, I wasn't thinking of eking out a living from doing theatre.

What did your parents and family think? What were the challenges you faced then, when TNS was probably a pioneer theatre company, and now, when there seems to be greater support for the arts both by the government and the general public? Are they very different?

It was in 1991 when I had to make a decision to leave teaching (I was an English and English Literature teacher with the Gifted Education Programme at Raffles Institution) to embark on



theatre full-time. It was a pivotal moment in my life. My Peranakan family was most supportive. My mother told me that as long as I had a degree, I could fall back on it if things didn't work out. She advised me that in life, it is important that I pursue what makes me happy. And that's because we have only one life.

The National Arts Council, a statutory board formed in the early 90s, evolved out of the Ministry of Community Development. This demonstrated concretely that the Arts would be under the government's radar for the long haul. It was an opportune moment and in order to seize it, I broke my teaching bond. Today, the government's sustained

CHAKAP CHAKAP

dedication to supporting the Arts has increased public confidence and perception that theatre is a viable and respectable career to pursue professionally.

We now have a few Junior Colleges offering 'A' level theatre studies. We have Theatre Studies at NUS. We have several theatre programmes at the various polytechnics, the National Institute of Education and the Nanyang Technological University. We have secondary schools offering Theatre at 'O' levels. And this year, we see the opening of School of The Arts (SOTA). Primary schools are now exploring the incorporation of theatre in their curriculum.

In 2006, TNS's very own play, "Off Centre", a play on mental illness, became the first Singaporean play selected for inclusion in the Literature curriculum for 'O' and 'N' levels.

The scaffolding of theatre education in Singapore is almost complete. This has been enhanced by the development of the theatre industry; a fruitful outcome of the government's planned social change over the past few decades.

So it did not matter if Singapore was undergoing a downturn then. Thankfully, I have supportive parents who have faith in me. I can't ask for better parents.

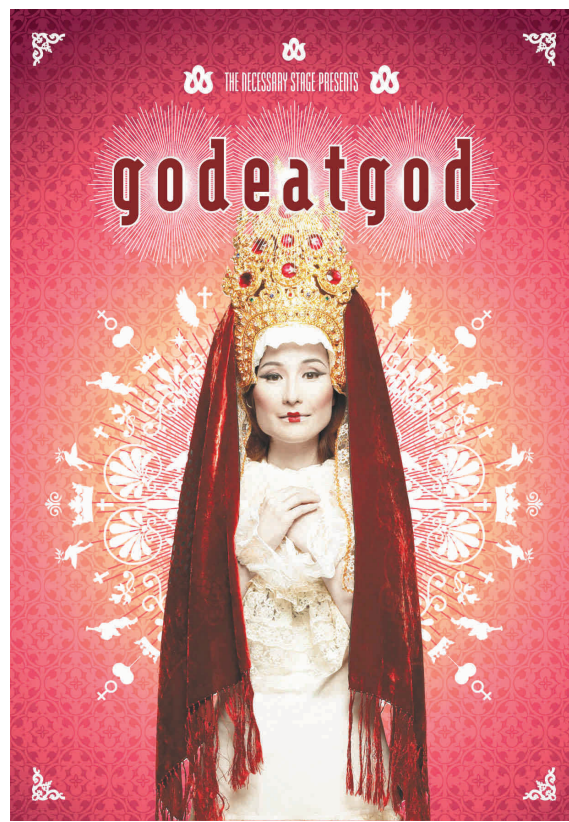
Godeatgod is one of the plays from The Necessary Stage.

Where do you see TNS going from here? What is the future like for both theatre in Singapore and arts companies such as yours? Is there going to be one?

Singapore is not China, Korea, Indonesia or Japan. We do not have a long cultural history. However, we have the openness to welcome, engender and nurture the cross pollination of various cultures. One cannot become Japanese. One has to be born a Japanese. But one can become Singaporean.

Singapore's progress and growth was reliant on our entrepot trade due to our strategic geographical position which encouraged numerous and varied travellers to call at our harbour. Singapore was, and continues to be, an ideas-exchange emporium. We have the Peranakans and the Eurasians. These hybridized ethnic identities make Singapore culturally dynamic and unique. We are not just a multicultural but an intercultural country, which interestingly illustrates how we can draw positive benefits from globalisation.

TNS has been creating works in multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual Singapore. Our vision, stemming organically from our 22-year-old theatre practice, aims to create innovative and challenging theatre that touches the heart and mind. We are well-placed to create opportunities for several cultural sensibilities to converse with one another.



We have developed a method and vocabulary which we have extrapolated and applied to our regional and international collaborations.

We have created "Mobile" with practitioners from Japan, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore which opened at the 2006 Singapore Arts Festival, toured to Malaysia and Setagaya Theatre in Tokyo. We have worked with Australian artists for "Past Caring" and we are currently using this method to work with Theatre KnAM, a Russian theatre company.

In recent years, Singapore has been importing many foreign works and nurtured the local mainstream theatre. As the ecology is sufficiently mature, in the near future, Singapore will invest more substantially in the artists and works that make us unique. I have all the faith that there is a future for theatre in Singapore, and a bright one. The theatre curriculum, as I have elaborated in earlier paragraphs, shows that there is no turning back. However, after having said all that, Singapore theatre is still in need of support where process, research and development are concerned.

Just how well regarded is Singapore theatre internationally? I mean we are the Number One Port, the Number One this and Number One that. What about theatre?

We are looking at years and years of colonialism

here. The West is always interested in exotic Asia; in the traditional arts/theatre forms. If a work has some *kabuki* or *noh* elements, or if it has a Beijing Opera treatment, it would be desirable. Singaporean theatre has to work extra hard to get international recognition.

The important thing to look at is investing in good processes and methods. If we are focussing on being Number One with no funding invested in research and development, then the aspiration can be misplaced or construed a lost cause. Singaporeans are very product-oriented. We desire results. And because of that, we import lots of things lock, stock and barrel from foreigners. Such foreign works have been tried and tested and they have garnered good reviews, which can be quoted in publicity collateral to attract full houses, which is a benchmark for success. So who would want to invest in a new Singaporean work that is untested and has yet to be acclaimed? Seldom do we have anything unique or original to begin with because we are averse to

explorations especially if they can fail and consequently injure our reputation. Our late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun did say, "a worthy failure is more valuable than a mediocre success".

So why focus on being Number One when we have yet to give priority to invest in good processes or be compassionate about experimental failures? These are the questions we should be asking ourselves about Singapore theatre instead of the misplaced anxieties of being Number One.

You are collaborating with Baba Peter Lee now on a play that's saucily named *Bedrooms*. Would you like to say something about it to our readers? Is it going to be about some dysfunctional Peranakan family and monster mother-in-law?

All Peranakan families are dysfunctional to begin with. And although it is an exploratory piece, we have yet to be rid of the monster mother-in-law. But there is a new take to it. Come watch! ♣

Photographs courtesy of The Necessary Stage

BEDROOMS: A New Play

Baba Alvin Tan will be directing a groundbreaking contemporary Peranakan play, *BEDROOMS*, presented by The Peranakan Association from 25 November to 6 December 2009 as part of the Association's Peranakan Festival.

Written by new playwright Adrian Koh, from a story developed by Koh, theatre doyen GT Lye and Peter Lee, it will be performed consecutively in two language versions, possibly a first for Singapore theatre. Alvin will direct the English version, from 1 to 6 December, which will star theatre luminaries Nora Samosir and Neo Swee Lin, as well as popular film and TV actors Annabelle Francis and Julian Hee.

The Baba Malay version, *BILEK RODA HIDOP*, will be staged earlier, from 25 to 29 November. Directed by up-and-coming director Zizi Azhar, the play will have a cast comprising four outstanding practitioners of Peranakan theatre: GT Lye, Mabel Lee, Cynthia Lee and Frederick Soh.

*More details on *Bedrooms* in the next issue of *The Peranakan*.*

The Peranakan Association Presents
A NEW PLAY IN BOTH ENGLISH & BABA MALAY



Bedrooms

BILEK RODA HIDOP

BY ADRIAN KOH

<p>Bilek Roda Hidop Directed by Zizi Azhar G T Lye Mabel Lee Cynthia Lee Frederick Soh 25 - 29 November 2009, 8 pm 28 November 2009 Matinee, 3 pm</p>	<p>Bedrooms Directed by Alvin Tan Neo Swee Lin Nora Samosir Anna Belle Francis Julian Hee 1 - 6 December 2009, 8 pm 6 December 2009 Matinee, 3 pm</p>
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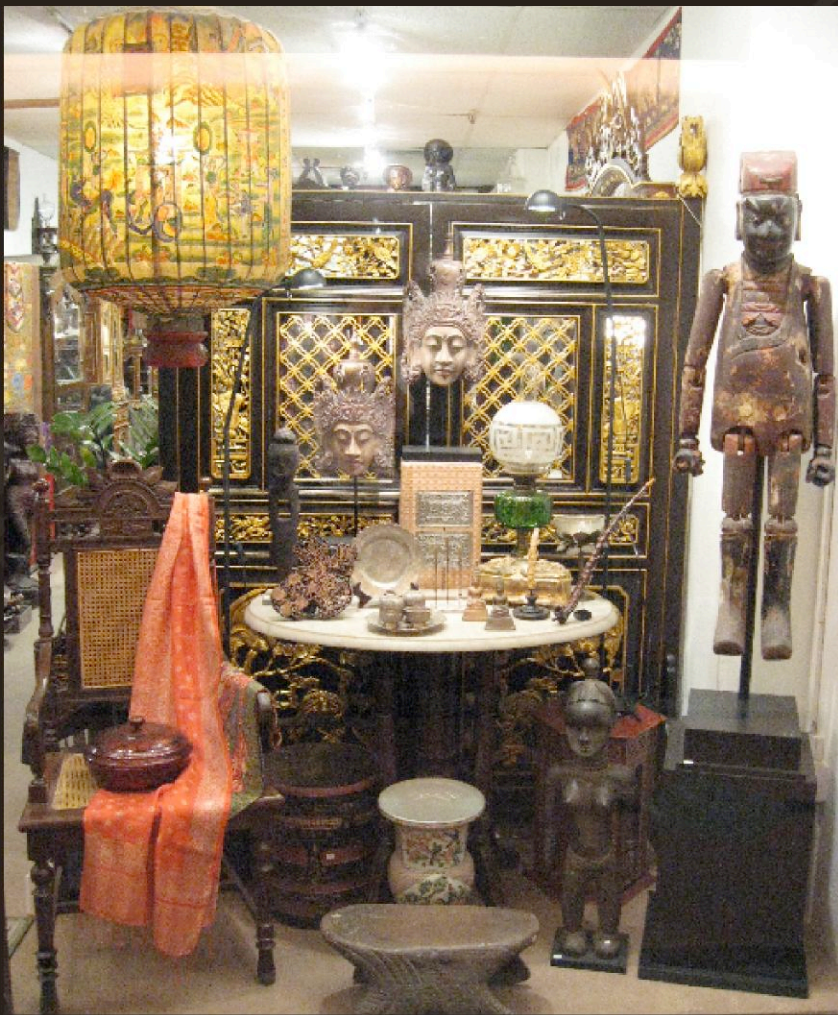
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AYER PASANG AYER SURUT (EBB AND FLOW)

It's yesterday once more in Gunong Sayang's latest production. Baba Emeric Lau reports

Be entranced by the splendour, richness and vibrance of Wayang Peranakan with its quick exchange of witty and often wicked rebuttals in Baba patois as the drama unfolds onstage.

Gunong Sayang's 22nd production is set in the mid 60s through early 70s. It is a domestic melodrama that centres on Nancy Tan (Irene Ong), a widow who was married to Matriarch Seet Chwee Neo's (KT) eldest son, Hock Chye. Nancy is a filial and respectful daughter-in-law and duty bound to take care of Chwee Neo.

Nancy comes from a wealthy Peranakan family whose family business was in shipping. Together with Hock Chye, she has a daughter, Amy (Ameline Goh). Nancy's younger brother decides to migrate to Canada to seek his fortune when their family's shipping business fails. Nancy and her daughter Amy have no choice but to move in with Chwee Neo.

Chwee Neo, who is in her late 70s, has another daughter-in-law Betty (Maureen Lim) who is married to her second son Hock Siew (Eugene Lee), an officer in the British Navy. They have a son Henry (Eddie Lim). Betty is vicious and spiteful. She is fond of interfering in the Seet family's affairs. Jealousy and envy pervade the household as Betty is a trouble-maker.

Chwee Neo also has an adopted daughter Rosy (Brigit Bong) who works as a secretary in an advocate firm. Rosy is vivacious and warm. Chwee Neo is fond of her and often complains to her about the family's many squabbles.

Chye Neo (Alicia Ang) is engaged by Chwee Neo to keep her company, and to manage the running of the household and chores.

Betty's mother Bee Neo (Jessie Chiang) has a close friend and neighbour Bong Neo (L Y Ming) who is insecure and fond of having her fortune read.



She is desperate to marry a true-blue Peranakan Baba. She consults Bibik Jantok (Francis Hogan) who is a famous *tukang tilek* (fortune teller) living in the heart of Katong.

Ayer Pasang Ayer Surut is also a visual treat, bringing you a slice of Peranakan culture that many of us may not be familiar with. Admire the lovely *sarong kebaya* worn by the cast and the melodious *keronchong* and *lagu asli* provided by resident band Dendang Irama. ♣

Tickets are available at Sistic outlets including online at www.sistic.com.sg. For priority bookings, call Gunong Sayang Association's tel: 68423921 during weekends.

23 – 24 October evening performances only. 25 October matinee only, ticket proceeds from this performance will be donated to local charity Assisi Home.

IT'S A WRAP

Nyonya Noreen Chan shares her fondness for neatly packaged delicacies

Cooking food in non-edible wrappings is an ancient tradition spanning diverse cultures. Many different natural materials can be used to seal the food for cooking. It could be clay or mud, or more commonly, leaves or other pliable materials. It depends on what is available locally, and the material has to be waterproof, heatproof and easy to handle. For example, the classic French provincial dish of *poularde de Bresse en vessie* is a whole chicken braised with vegetables in a pig's bladder. In Southeast Asia, leaves are widely used, especially banana leaves and to a lesser extent, the *nipah* or attap leaf.

The French method of *en papillote* (*al cartoccio* in Italian) uses parchment paper (or more commonly nowadays, foil wrap) and is a low fat, healthy option that allows the food to steam in its juices in the oven. It is especially good for delicate fish. The Chinese traditional dish of Beggar's Chicken – where a whole marinated chicken is covered in clay before cooking – has been elevated to gourmet status, such that no beggar could afford one!

In Peranakan cuisine, which derives much from Malay and Indonesian cooking, the banana leaf is used to make both sweet and savoury dishes. The favoured leaf is from the *pisang batu* (so named because the banana fruit itself is full of small seeds, like gravel), as it does not discolour when exposed to heat. The *pisang batu* flower bud is good for *sambal jantung pisang*, so even though the fruit is not good to eat the rest of the plant is useful.

To prepare banana leaves for cooking, the hard central stem must be discarded. The leaves can be cut to size and rendered more pliable by scalding or sunning for a few hours. After this they can be folded to make parcels of different shapes and sizes, which can then be steamed. The parcels can be further

lightly grilled for additional flavour, as with *rempah udang* (what the Malays call *pulot panggang*) or *otak otak*. The surface of the leaf is naturally non-stick, so there is no need to grease it, and once used the leaf can be composted or safely discarded as it is biodegradable.

RECIPES

Pais is usually understood to be fish, either whole or in large chunks, mixed with spices and wrapped in banana leaf to be steamed or grilled. *Otak* (or *otah*) on the other hand, is a fish and spice paste, where the seafood is either in paste form or in small pieces;

the mixture is wrapped in banana or coconut leaves. The Peranakan influence comes in the use of fragrant herbs like *daon kadok* or *daon limau purut*.

The following recipe is for a steamed *pais*, which uses a lot of herbs and is always folded in a tent-like shape. Either fish or prawns can be used – we like to have some of both so that we can choose – and the variety and amount of herbs can be varied according to taste. For example, if *puchot buas buas* is hard to come by, *daon kadok* (wild pepper leaf) can be substituted. If you like *nasi ulam* you will enjoy this. The recipe is reproduced as written from my Mama's book, and comes from my Mak Cho.

My father's paternal grandmother (Lim Kim Neo or Mrs Chia Keng Chin) was nicknamed *Mak Payong* – we children called her *Mak Cho Payong* or Umbrella great-grandmother! She was an excellent cook. To this day my father reminisces about her *ayam chilli garam* and *babi assam*. Every Lunar New Year no one could better her *talam cheokwa* (seaweed agar-agar), and I remember that when we visited, we had to eat at least one thin clear golden slice of sweet jelly to ensure luck for the coming year.

My great-grandmother Mak Cho Payong, with her husband Chia Keng Chin and eldest son Harry, standing in front of the family home "Grasslands" in St Thomas Walk.





Pais Ikan.

PAIS IKAN or UDANG (from Mak Payong)

1 kati fish, deboned – wash and cut 1"x3" in size
1 kati prawns (medium), peeled

Rempah grind finely:

45 shallots
Belachan 1" square (roasted)
10 buah keras
1 fresh chilli
2 coconuts to make 1½ cups
No. 1 milk

Leaves:

*Puchok buas*², discard central stem (most) *kobek*²
Puchok kunyet iris (12-14 leaves, sliced finely)
Daon kemangi (about 1/3 quantity of *buas*²)
Daon lemo purut (14 leaves, sliced finely)

Method: Mix the *rempah* and leaves in a bowl. Add 1½ teaspoon salt and 1 teaspoon

sugar. Add coconut milk, a little at a time. When of the right consistency, season to taste. Lastly, add the fish and prawns. Wrap in banana leaves (like *kueh bongkang*) and steam about 15 minutes.

There isn't just one kind of *otak-otak*; every family has their special way of preparing this dish. What is common is to make a kind of spicy custard with *rempah*, coconut milk and egg, to be mixed with seafood. Homemade versions often include fragrant herbs.

On the following page are two recipes from Malaysia. My maternal grandfather – himself from Malacca had relatives who lived in Tangkak, just across the state line in Johore (a few hours by bullock cart according to my mother) and their version of *otak* can be cooked in a pyrex dish in

the oven until firm, and served in chunks.

The Penang version comes from my *Tua Kim Poh Lim Siew Boey*, who passed several northern Peranakan recipes to my Mama, including *Achar Awak* and *Perot Ikan* (Fish Stomach). This kind of *otak* is always steamed, whether in individual parcels or in a dish. It bears a strong resemblance to – and is probably from the same origins as – the Thai dish of *Hor Mok Talay*, which is fish in red curry paste, topped with coconut cream and traditionally steamed in banana leaf parcels. In Hua Hin, I came across a *tze-char* restaurant which served a scrumptious *Hor Mok* prepared in the microwave! This had the fish sitting on top of a generous serving of Thai holly basil (*krapow*).

OTAK-OTAK CHUAY (Tangkak)

1 kati fish fillet cut up, or prawns (peeled)
purot, *daon kencho* and *daon kermangi*, all *iris* (sliced finely)
2 eggs
6 oz No.1 *santan* (coconut milk)
1½ tsp salt
1 tsp sugar to taste
Rempah: grind
2½" *lengkuas*
1" square *belachan*
3 *seray*
¾" *kunyit*
25 shallots
6 buah keras
4 fresh, 5 dried chillies
4 *puchot kunyit*, 6 *lemo*
Mix together and wrap in banana leaves, steam 10-15 minutes. Can also bake or grill.



Otak-Otak Chuay (Tangkak).



Top: Otak
Penang

Right Kueh
Bongkong.

OTAK PENANG or BLOTOK (Siew Boey)

1 kati fish sliced into
1" thickness.

Rempah: to grind fine and mix
with fish (*kurau, ang-go-li or jernap*)

6 dried chillis (seeded)

8 shallots

2 fresh chillies

2 garlic cloves

3/4" kunyit

1/2" lengkuas

5 peppercorns

1 serai

1 buah keras

1/2" square belachan

1 dessertspoon pulot (glutinous
rice), fried

1 egg

4 - 5 oz santan no. 1 (milk from
1 1/2 coconuts)

3/4 tsp salt

1 tsp sugar

6 daon lemo purut sliced fine

Daon kadok to be placed at
bottom of dish or banana leaf.

Method: Mix fish and rempah
together, adjust taste. Place daon
kadok on banana leaf and spoon
otak mixture on top (fish with
rempah together) and fold.

Repeat until all is finished.

Another easy way, or if you
cannot get banana leaves, is to
put daon kadok at the bottom of
a dish and put the otak mixture
on top. Steam for 10-15 minutes.

SOMETHING SWEET

Malay and nyonya kueh (cakes) are mostly steamed, and many are wrapped first in banana leaves. Nowadays, it is uncommon to see these kinds of kueh in Singapore; you would have to go to Malacca to have an idea of the range available. One type that is rare in Singapore is kueh bongkong: the parcels are shaped like little tents. The kueh is soft and best eaten with a spoon, all the better to scoop up the gula melaka that comes oozing out!

The following recipe (reproduced as written) is from my grandmother's friend, whose name is found beside several recipes in Mama's book, so they must have swapped cooking secrets frequently!



KUEH BONGKONG (from Mrs Gim Liang)

1/2 kati rice } grind
1 handful pulot } together
1 kati gula melaka sliced and mixed
with a little white sugar
2 coconuts grated, mix with water
to make 42 oz of milk (or 2 3/4
bowls)
A few pandan leaves and banana
leaves for wrapping

Method: Mix the flour with
coconut milk until even, add a
pinch of salt. Cook on a low fire
till it is cooked. Put a spoon of
batter on a piece of banana leaf,
add sugar and a pandan leaf.
Cover another spoon of batter on
the top of the sugar, wrap and
steam till it is cooked. ❖

Photography by Jason Ong

SAVOURING THE FLAVOUR!

The Singapore Food Festival goes Peranakan

This year's Singapore Food Festival was held from 17-26 July, and rode the wave of public interest in Peranakan culture. A "Food Street" spanning Read Bridge at Clarke Quay, offered a mouth-watering variety of local cuisine: Chinese, Malay, Indian and of course, Peranakan! A "Nyonya Mobile" cruised the Central Business District with instructors "on board" to teach various crafts, including *bakchang*-weaving, pineapple tart-forming and even *sambal belachan*-pounding!

For the dedicated gourmet, however, the true jewel in the crown of this year's Food Festival must surely be the series of Culinary Workshops conducted by leading Peranakan chefs, including Nelson Li, Shirley Tay, our First Vice-President Peter Wee and the effervescent Violet Oon.

While all the food was slowly digesting, Peter and Violet joined Randall Ee, curator at the Peranakan Museum, on 24 July, to deliver a seminar on the art of Peranakan dining, covering the beautiful porcelain tableware, key and exotic ingredients and interjecting their own personal recollections.

A "Beauty and the Feast Dinner" was organised together with the Peranakan Museum, also on 24 July. It was a dinner with a twist as Chefs Joe Yap and Violet Oon served up contemporary interpretations of traditional Peranakan food, using premium ingredients like wagyu beef, *foie gras* and lobsters to substitute the more traditional fare of shin beef, chicken liver and prawns respectively. Guests were also treated to a fashion show featuring the latest designs from Foundation Jewellery.

The Festival closed on 26 July on a high note



with the Swissotel Merchant Court hosting the Longest Ever Peranakan Buffet line that featured 100 nyonya dishes lined up right across Read Bridge. The whole experience left one wishing for a larger stomach! ❖

Below left: A brass quintet performs at the Festival opening on 17 July.

Below right: Food stalls line the span of Read Bridge.



RECIPES FROM THE SINGAPORE FOOD FESTIVAL 2009

The recipes below are by Violet Oon, dubbed Singapore's food ambassador. Violet is a respected cookbook author and consultant to the Singapore Food Festival 2009.



SATAY AYAM GORENG

Ingredients

- 1 chicken cut into pieces or 1 kg stewing beef, cut into 1 cm slices
- 3 cups thick coconut cream or freshly squeezed coconut cream from 2 coconuts
- 2 tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 to 1½ tsp salt
- 2 to 4 tsp sugar
- 1 stalk lemon grass, smashed
- 3 daun limau purut (kaffir lime leaves)

Spice Mixture

- 5 dried chillies or 1 tbsp dried chilli paste
- 5 candlenuts, washed and drained
- 3 fresh red chillies, sliced roughly
- 150g shallots, peeled, sliced roughly
- 1 tsp belacan (shrimp paste)
- 1 tbsp coriander powder*

Method

Wash dried chillies, soak in hot water for

about 30 minutes till softened. Cut the stalks off and cut the chillies into small pieces.

Pound the candlenuts till semi-fine. Add the fresh chillies and pound till semi-fine. Add the dried chillies, pound for about 3 to 4 minutes. Add the shrimp paste and pound well. The last ingredient to add is the shallots. Pound till the mixture is very fine.

Alternatively you can grind the ingredients in a food processor till you get a smooth paste.

Mix all ingredients in a saucepan and bring to the boil. Simmer till the liquid is reduced and the gravy is thick. The meat should be tender.

Serve with rice, first removing the lemon grass and lime leaves.

* Coriander Powder: Dry fry coriander seeds in a frying pan till fragrant. Grind in a coffee grinder and sieve.



ITEK TIM

(Long simmered duck and salted mustard greens soup) Origin - Hokkien Chinese

Ingredients

- 1 duck, cleaned, with buttocks chopped off*
- 2 tbsp brandy
- 1 kg pig's trotters, chopped into large pieces**
- 500g to 600g kiam chye (salted pickled mustard greens), soaked in water
- 1 dried tamarind fruit called assam puay
- 1 thumbsize of lengkuas (galangal), smashed with a cleaver
- 4 to 5 litres water
- ½ tsp salt - to taste
- 1 tbsp brandy

To finish: 1 tbsp good quality cognac

Method

Wash duck well and chop into 4 pieces. Dry well with paper towels, rub brandy all over and then rinse again and drain. The brandy helps remove any lingering odour.

Wash pork leg, drain till dry.

The kiam chye should have been soaked in water for about 20 minutes to remove excess salt. Drain and cut into large palm-sized pieces.

Bring water to the boil, add the pig's trotters and boil for 20 minutes. Add the duck and bring to boil over high heat before adding the kiam chye, tamarind fruit, lengkuas, salt and brandy.

Bring to boil again and then turn heat down to low and simmer till the duck is breakaway tender and the pig's trotters meat and skin are soft and gooey in texture. This process takes slightly over 1 hour.

At the end of the cooking time, add more salt to taste and finish off by pouring a tablespoon of brandy into the soup at the table.

*There are glands on either side of the buttocks which secrete a very unpleasant odour and taste

** Pig's trotters are used to add a delicious gelatinous quality to the soup



BABI PONGTEH (Braised pork with salted bean paste)

Recipe by Shirley Tay, Chef at the Peranakan kitchen of Swissotel Merchant Court Hotel

(Serves 10)

Ingredients

2 kg pork belly (cut into pieces about 5cm)
500 gm shallots
300 gm garlic
200 gm salted bean paste
Dark soya sauce for colour
100 gm sugar
150 ml oil
1½ litres water
1 chicken cube

Method

Blend the shallots, garlic and salted bean paste together.

Heat up the oil in a

pot. When oil is hot, add in the blended mixture of shallots, garlic and salted bean paste and fry until fragrant and slightly golden brown. Add in the pork belly and dark soya sauce and continue frying until the pork is evenly coated.

Add in enough water just to cover the pork belly and stir in seasoning.

Simmer for one hour or until the pork is tender.

The dish is ready to serve hot with steamed rice.



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RECOGNISING THE PHOENIX IN OUR HEARTS

Baba Emeric Lau reports on what some younger association members have been up to.

*Working 9 to 5, what a way to make a livin'
Barely getting'by
Its all takin' and no givin'
They just use your mind
And they never give you credit
Its enough to drive you
Crazy if you let it
from "9 to 5" by Dolly Parton*

The lyrics above aptly sum up the hectic, dreary life of a typical office worker - the daily grind for many Singaporeans including younger Peranakans. Amidst calendars saturated with appointments are the gems that we eagerly anticipate: brief weekend getaways to nearby destinations, an evening catching up with old friends and, for me, the meetings with my counterparts from The Peranakan Association (TPA).

There exists a small but dedicated group of younger TPA members who are happily connected by a shared interest to keep Peranakan culture abreast of the times. We young people form a majority of the Membership Sub-Committee and are exploring ways to make membership even more attractive.

To that end, we have to thank The Peranakan Magazine for its support in running a new series of "Members' Privileges" advertisements (opposite



page 1), featuring special deals negotiated with our partners both from within the Peranakan community and externally. Do watch out for these advertisements in the coming issues, and surf into the Association website for the latest updates.

We've also embarked on an image revamp for the Association, starting with our all-new membership forms, cards and kits - these being the very first items all new members will receive. We are happy to send these elegantly-designed pieces along to our existing members for a nominal processing fee.

Recognising the need to stay relevant and well-integrated with a younger generation, this year's Peranakan Festival, confirmed for 27 November - 6 December, boasts the Singapore Management University (SMU) Campus downtown (a stone's throw from The Peranakan Museum) as a focal point of activities, including the Food & Craft Babazaar, several "live" demonstrations and exhibitions as well as an heirloom sale of pieces.

In addition, our new line of merchandise features new-age items like digital camera carrying cases and padded laptop slippers with a tasteful touch of traditional batik motifs. Each piece is unique, as the fabric is of a non-repetitive design. They make excellent gifts.



Guest-of-honour
MP Teo Ser Luck
presents the
Malaysian contingent
with a picture at the
closing of the 14th
Singapore-Malaysia
Youth Camp.



Left: Manning TPA's booth at the Singapore Food Festival 2009.

Right: Guests at a BabaHouse talk.

On weekends and when schedules permit, the group finds time to help out at events such as manning TPA's stall at the Peranakan Museum's anniversary, or collaborating ad-hoc with other youth-oriented events, such as introducing participants of the Singapore-Malaysia Youth Camp 2009 to aspects of the culture.

Keeping our efforts project-based has helped us to apply the diverse skills and talent in our mixed bag of keen volunteers. Simultaneously, we have been able to further develop the social networks established while conducting everyday business. This is but one channel that the young Peranakans are

exploring in an effort to keep Baba culture relevant to modern living.

It is heartening to see more young people volunteering their time, and we hope that our collective efforts will ensure the continued Renaissance of Peranakan culture well into the 21st century and beyond. Do join us if you can! ♣

Interested to join the younger Peranakans? Call us at 9621 0420 or email news@peranakan.org.sg

For more information on Membership Privileges, obtaining the new member's cards and kits, and the upcoming Peranakan Festival, do surf into www.peranakan.org.sg. Call us at 9621 0420 to make enquiries on our new merchandise.



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PERANAKANS ON PARADE!

Main Wayang Director Baba Richard Tan salutes a historic National Day first for our community

For the first time in the 44-year history of National Day Parades, a Peranakan community of Babas and Nyonyas are represented as an ethnic group, standing tall beside the other better-known local ethnic Malay, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian community groups.

With over 100 volunteers and performers from Main Wayang Company, they comprise mainly of numerous actual families extending into three generations, relatives and friends, ranging from the ages of four to 74! From this colourfully quaint and closely knit group, it is truly a wonderful sight to hear the younger generation picking up familiar phrases of our patois and calling out to their 'mamas, ee ees, koo koos, kim kims, checheks' etc, as they wait patiently for their turn to perform.

The lively song and dance medley to the songs 'Rasa Sayang' and 'Singapore Town' were cleverly choreographed by Nyonya Jackie Pereira, with solo segments featuring Baba Tony Quek and Bibik Francis Hogan. The real 'life & beauty' of this event goes to the united spirit and undying dedication of our performers. With over two and a half months of rehearsals under the sun, including full dress rehearsals, National Education shows, leading to the preview and finally, the big show on 9 August, the event has brought everyone closer and the 'gotong



royong' bonding is something everyone involved will always treasure.

Chief co-ordinator Nyonya Marlene Foo and all group leaders worked tirelessly to ensure a smooth and seamless flow of activities week after week. It also takes a dynamic Baba with foresight and vision - Baba Ivan Heng doing the Peranakans proud this year as the National Day Parade Creative & Show Director - to weave in the Peranakan element into the 'Heart of Heartland' on a national scale! Indeed, the 'Peranakan Jati with Hati' (true Peranakan with a heart).

Main Wayang will continue to promote and

expand the boundaries of sharing our Peranakan culture locally and globally. So, what's next? We are already preparing for a grand Chingay 2010 when we Peranakans will be back in a different parade. A street party parade! And we are recruiting volunteers now. ♣

Contact Main Wayang at 65-63843181 or email peranakan@mainwayang.com.

The Peranakan contingent at the National Day Parade.



Young nyonyas in brilliantly coloured kebayas put up a fine performance.

EVENTS

HOT DEMAND FOR THE PERANAKAN VOICES

Baba Chan Eng Thai lists the impressive line-up of engagements from February to June

The Peranakan Voices (PVs) were invited to perform at the wedding dinner of Rodney and Michelle Ee, at the Conrad Hotel on 22 February. *Wak Wak GT Lye* was the life of the party that evening as the PVs sang on.

The Peranakan Museum's 1st Anniversary Celebrations on 25 April had the PVs perform their repertoire to a full crowd at the museum's birthday bash.

On 12 May, the Singapore Pools' Little Nyonya night at Sports Buzz saw the PVs *joget* and sing to the audience at a *tok panjang* dinner.

Mother's Day was celebrated Peranakan style on 23 May at a heartlanders' dinner organized by the Toa Payoh Residents Committee, with Minister of Education Dr Ng Eng Hen as Guest of Honour.

The PVs were also invited to sing again at the opening of the Peranakan Museum Baba Bling Exhibition on 28 May.

The SMRT Circle Line inauguration on 30 May took on a Peranakan flavour as the PVs sang before the commuters at the new Bishan MRT station, deep underground!

Two Peranakan Nights were held at the Tanah Merah Club on 18 May and the Tanglin Club on 20 June respectively. *Wak Wak GT Lye* together with the PVs entertained the diners with songs and *joget*. They also delivered a rendition of how a nyonya



maiden was married and the trials she had to endure as a daughter-in-law in the days of old.

At all the events, the Peranakans were represented as a truly unique product of the blending of cultures of Singapore.

While the Peranakans used to be often labeled with the acronym OCBC, *orang cina bukan cina*, the fact remains:

***Orang Cina Bukan Cina,
Orang Melayu Bukan Melayu,
Orang Apa Peranakan Kita,
Orang Jati Singapura Dari Dulu!***

Chinese of China surely we are not,
Malays of Malaysia neither are we,
What are we then the Peranakans?

True Singaporeans from time immemorial!

ONG POH NEO DROPS IN AT THE TANGLIN CLUB TO CELEBRATE PERANAKAN CULTURE

With food by renowned chef Joe Yap, entertainment by the Peranakan Voices and the Locomotions, a best-dressed Nyonya contest and Chan Eng Thai as the evening's emcee, the Tanglin Club's "Peranakan Evening" blew away everyone's economic blues, H1N1 anxieties and preoccupations with the blistering weather.

The PVs sang *Baju Panjang*, *Nona-Chan*, *Sayang*

Sayang and a *Singapura* medley to an appreciative audience of 150 members and guests, rounding off the evening with a *joget* session where everyone was invited to participate.

All the ladies, resplendent in their sarong kebaya, made up a delightful garden of "butterflies, dragon-flies and multi-coloured flowers in full-bloom"! ♣

HERE COMES THE SUN

The Sun Festival goes Peranakan in Singapore



Peranakan Bling and fashion at the Peranakan Museum on 8 October.

Peranakan culture will be prominently featured in the Singapore Sun Festival from 2 – 12 October this year. This annual global lifestyle festival is also celebrated annually in Cortona, Tuscany in Italy and the Napa Valley, California in USA.

The festival is unique this year in celebrating Singapore's rich Peranakan heritage. It will offer tours of the Peranakan Museum and Baba House, and a special charity dinner with cuisine prepared by celebrity chefs Philip Chia and Mrs Elizabeth Lee.

The festival will also bring in other celebrities among whom are the principal dancers from the renowned Bolshoi Theatre and Marinsky Theatre, Sir James Galway, Joan Chen, Deepak Chopra, Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, Elvis Costello, and two Michelin star chef Thierry Marx.

On 2 October, a charity dinner will be held at Baba House. Be transported back in time to the early 1900s and experience how a wealthy Peranakan would have lived and dined. A sumptuous, multi-course Peranakan feast home-cooked by Mrs



Elizabeth Lee and the chef of Peranakan, a family restaurant, will be served in the company of Literature Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka.

A dazzling evening of cocktails, Peranakan fashion and bling will be held on 8 October at the Peranakan Museum. Award-winning costume designer Moe Kasim will present traditional and modern fusions of the sarong kebaya in the fashion show with Foundation Jewellers displaying its collection of newly hand-crafted Peranakan jewellery. Canapes will be prepared by Chef Baba Philip Chia while Main Wayang Company will entertain with its repertoire of Peranakan songs.

Specially arranged charity tours of Baba House will be conducted on 10 and 11 October by our own Bibik GT Lye who will entertain with his unique turns of phrase and anecdotes about Peranakan life. ♣

Book your tickets at www.sistic.com.sg. For latest updates, please visit www.singaporesunfestival.com

Bibik GT Lye at the Baba House on 10 and 11 October.

PERANAKAN PARODY

Baba Colin Chee relates a visit to Chris Yap's latest exhibition at the Baba House

June – 31 December 2009, Produced by the NUS Museum

Baba Chris Yap is an artist. He plays with his camera. He overlays a kebaya with accessories made from cut mirrors and ribbons. He decorates a travel bag with bits of mirrors that tell a story of phoenixes and bats and embryos.

Chris loves to tell stories.

"When I was first brought to Baba House while it was being conserved, it brought back memories. I was overwhelmed by them," Chris said.

You would be similarly overwhelmed on visiting his works there. After panting up the flight of stairs to its third storey, you wait to catch your breath. (The smart ones use the lift, of course, and the elderly.) Not for long though, because the first installation that grabs your attention is the brown

leather travel bag with cut mirrors like mother-of-pearl laid into blackwood furniture.

Brilliant installation, I thought, until I stepped into the main hall and saw, hung up on the left wall, five very large colourful beautiful photo montages of very colourful beautiful people. I even know several of them.

"Mmmm. Interesting portraits these, I thought. Sooo Peranakan."

"What are these photographs supposed to represent?" I asked Chris, while seating down on the floor and leaning my back against the wall.

"You've got to read the story line further down the room," he said, getting comfortable too. "Then the pictures will tell you a story or stories."

I did as Chris suggested, getting up to go to the far end of the room. It's about a king and queen, an illegitimate cross-dressing son and his son and the distant niece of the king and her daughter, two more princesses and a royal cook and a Chinese businessman, along with the young prince of the first princess and young prince of the second princess.

How more Peranakan a story can you get? *Reti?* (Understand?) Just go catch the show. And enjoy it whichever way you want it. It's worth the trip there. ♣

Chris Yap with his Peranakan tale.



THE ACCIDENTAL GROCER

Nyonya Claire Seet savours a view of Nepal from inside the Baba House air-well

The mid-morning event on 13 June was attended by 34 members and guests of NUS (a more-than full house), including an organic farmer from India, all united by a common interest in

organic food. Cynthia Wee-Hoefer (left) explained how she accidentally fell into the role of a green grocer, and for some parts of the year, an accidental farmer, and perhaps the first nyonya farmer at that.

A slideshow presentation was screened in the central air-well

wall of the Baba House. At that time of the morning, the sunlight just barely bathed the air well and the projected images of Phulbari, the Hoefer farm, and its surroundings. The buildings set in the landscape

are picturesque to say the least, and the view from her farm on the Nepalese hills is simply breathtaking.

Cynthia showed the development of the farm through its various stages, and explained how organic farming isn't just about what you eat, but a way of life. Animal and plant waste are mixed to become fertilizers. Plants such as marigold are purposely grown to confuse insects and bugs, hence insecticide doesn't need to be used. Any blemishes and marks on fruits and vegetables are welcome because this is nature's true way, unlike genetically modified, picture-perfect veggies with not an imperfection in sight!

The talk was completed with a sampling of jams and chutneys from Cynthia's farm complemented with organic lemongrass tea. ♣

Photograph courtesy of Hans and Cynthia Wee-Hoefer.



Going organic with Cynthia.

EVENTS

RARE-ZLE DAZZLE

Nyonya Linda Chee writes from the opening night of
Baba Bling: The Peranakans and Their Jewellery

29 May - 13 December 2009 • Peranakan Museum

What is different about Peranakan jewellery pre- and post-19th Century? Why did nyonyas recycle their blings? Where did they keep their jewellery? How were these made?

Glean the answers and get a glimpse of the monied lifestyle from the latest and most dazzling exhibition at the Peranakan Museum, "Baba Bling: The Peranakans and Their Jewellery". More than a few "wahs" and "wows" were heard at the 28 May opening as guests thronged in to ogle at the rare collection of gold, diamond, silver and pearl accessories worn by the nyonyas, and some decorated babas, from over four generations.

In her address, Guest-of-Honour Mrs Elaine Lim, wife of Minister Lim Swee Say, spoke with a special fondness and familiarity with the Museum. It became evident why when she was revealed to be a former docent! That made the job easier, or perhaps more testing, for Museum curator Randall Ee as he brought her through the exhibition over two floors, featuring more than 300 items loaned by Peranakan families and collectors.

One particularly rare exhibit is the goldsmith's work table which in those days was brought to the customer's house and where it stayed, with the craftsman visiting, until the commissioned piece was completed. An old-world security system, one

may say, to ensure no fooling around with the nyonya's precious ransom of *intan* and *berlian*.

Randall, who curated the exhibition, said many more Peranakan families came forward to offer their heirloom pieces after the opening. Perhaps we will see another stunning show of bling next year?

As part of the six-and-a-half month exhibition, the Peranakan Museum is organising a series of monthly lectures conducted by speakers comprising gemologists, academics and experts. Details can be found at www.peranakanmuseum.sg. ♣

Photographs below courtesy of The Peranakan Museum.



Kerosang is on loan from Mr and Mrs Louis Tan Tiang Hong. Wedding hat is on loan from Peter Wee.

Photograph by Colin Chee.

Left: The humble goldsmith's equipment from where master pieces were crafted.

Right: Guest-of-honour Mrs Elaine Lim, accompanied by hubby Minister Lim Swee Say, tours the exhibition.



EVENTS

RASA SAYANG EH!

Nyonya Linda Chee is captivated by little nyonys performing for charity

Peranakan culture took on a new charm as a “Nyonya-Baba” ensemble of young and not-so-young fiddlers performed to raise funds for the Assisi Hospice to build a gym for their residents.

Music teacher Tatyana Todorova became

“Nyonya” Tatyana (in blue kebaya) leading her merry band of sarong kebaya-ed and batik-shirted students from Mandeville Music & Drama School to play Peranakan tunes, supported by professional

flautist ‘Baba’ Ivan Ivanov and Ken Lim on keyboard. The Peranakan-themed charity event on 18 July tied in as a celebration of favourite local

music dating back to the early 1900s. It was probably the first time that many of the children there, and their proud parents, were exposed to it. Whether or not tunes like “Kopi Susu” and “Trek Tek Tek” were familiar, the evening programme held surprises that easily captivated all. What do you know, *Bengawan Solo* with a poignant touch on the *er-hu*, sung by Tay Ke Wei.

Host for the evening, Baba Alvin Yapp, was equally entertaining with his rapid-fire backgrounders on the oldies that included “*Ikan Kekik, Suriram, Mak Inang, Oleh Oleh Bandung*” and even the fast-paced *Serani* classic jig, “*Jinkiri Nona*”. Peranakan “Idol” Shondell Lim gave a pleasing rendition of “*Saputangan*”.

Like the final tune *Rasa Sayang Eh*, literally translated as feeling of love, the fund-raiser was a heartwarming show of care and concern by volunteers who chipped in with the entertainment as well as sumptuous Peranakan fare. ♣



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MATRIARCHS IN MAYHEM

Baba Emeric Lau turns the spotlight on Martin Loh's latest paintings

Titled "Recesses of My Mind", Martin Loh's 12 new works that were exhibited at Utterly Art from 7-12 July appear to reflect a more confident, yet freshly experimental, handling of his synonymous images of brightly attired Peranakan bibiks posed against equally fussy, technicolour-drenched backgrounds.

The new paintings are still in Martin's signature naive style, but anyone casting more than a glance would immediately notice elements that appear darker and more intriguing than in Martin's previous pieces: images of wild beasts intrude upon the paintings' wonderland landscape, and several pieces contain images that reference sex and violence, even as they are peppered with serene lotuses against a pastiche of jewel-hued pastoral langour.

While Martin's latest direction will no doubt engender some controversy, the paintings stand out for making a bold departure by defying



categorisation as pleasing pieces of decorative art: they engage, deliver an unexpected punch, and perhaps set the tone for a new direction in Peranakan artwork – say goodbye to rose-tinted nostalgia and hello to darker shades. ♣

110 YEARS OF LEARNED LADIES

Nyonya Melissa Quek reflects on SCGS' Peranakan roots

Singapore Chinese Girls' School's (SCGS) 110th Anniversary Dinner was held at the Fairmont Hotel's Raffles Ballroom on 25 July. It resembled a bustling family reunion, with alumni milling about in their brightly coloured kebayas and genuine little nyonias showing off their beaded slippers.

SCGS was founded in 1899 by a group of Straits Chinese gentlemen who believed in educating women - a boldly progressive stance back then. The school took much pride in her heritage and weaved various aspects of school life into the evening's proceedings. Generations of SCGS girls dined on Peranakan cuisine in a ballroom decked out in batik, a most apt celebration of their alma mater's origins.

An "old girl" of the school myself, I listened to the various speeches and felt touched when I realized just how much the school had nurtured me. The speeches reiterated the school's commitment to providing girls with a balanced



education, its determination to produce students of high moral fibre who would be of relevance and service to the community, and who would accomplish all this with dignity and grace.

Indeed, the evening paid tribute to the past and looked forward to the future, as reflected by the performers who dressed in a combination of contemporary formal wear and kebayas. They presented a repertoire that spanned the history of the school, capping the celebration with perfect music for the evening. ♣

EVENTS

A MILESTONE IN RESEARCH

Nyonya Jackie Yoong reports from the inaugural conference on Peranakan Chinese in Southeast Asia

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

• 22 May 2009, the National Library

Organized jointly by the NUS Museum and Chinese Heritage Centre, with the support of Ms Agnes Tan in memory of her father the late Tun Tan Cheng Lock

The multi-disciplinary international conference, the first of its kind, marks a milestone in the research and study of the community. It had

a strong line-up of presenters who are experts in their fields, and a good mix of academics and practitioners from all three countries. The four sessions featured a general overview, social and political networks, language and education, and material and popular culture.

Professor Wang Gungwu, in his keynote address, proposed nationalism as the key force in conceptualizing the “Peranakan Phenomenon”.

Others who held the floor included Professor Tan Chee Beng, Professor Leo Suryadinata, Mr Kwa Chong Guan, Dr Mely Tan, Dr Lee Kam

Hing, Dr Neil Khor, Mr Alister Chew, Mr Didi Kwartanda and Dr Chua Ai Lin.

Baba Peter Lee and Ms Khoo Salma Nasution

discussed the strategies and challenges of curating the NUS Baba House and Sun Yat Sen Penang base respectively, from a practitioner's perspective.

Professor Leo Suryadinata concluded from the papers that the definition of “Peranakan” remains open to debate, and differs across time and place.

The conference was a success, judging from the big turnout and that a majority stayed till the end. Those who missed the engaging and informative session, fret not: the organizers intend to publish the papers in the near future. ♣



Prof Wang Gungwu spoke on the Peranakan Phenomenon.

Photograph Courtesy of NUS Museum

PERANAKANS @ SPORTSBUZZ

Baba Emeric Lau joins in the Bababuzz at PoMo

To relate to a younger generation of punters, Singapore Pools has rechristened its premises at Paradiz Centre (now called PoMo) “Sportsbuzz@Paradiz”, imbuing the nation’s largest legit gaming body with some elan. Our President, Lee Kip Lee, Mrs Lee, and other members of the Association gathered at this newly-refurbished venue to attend the Singapore Pools fundraising dinner for the President’s Challenge 2009 held on 12 May.

Billed A Glimpse of the Little Nyonya, the evening was a smorgasbord of all things Peranakan. Stage veteran Francis Hogan and The Peranakan Voices took to the stage to entertain the audience, while Baba Chan Eng Thai recited a pantun composed for the occasion. Chef Philip

Chia catered a tok-panjang style dinner that was both contemporary yet true to the featured dishes’ nyonya origins. Pierre Png and Joanne Peh of the MediaCorp hit drama serial made a special

appearance to chat and pose for photos with the guests, and everyone, of course, had a go at buying packs of scratch cards and lucky draw coupons just “for a flutter”, to quote Singapore Pools CEO Mr Tan Soo Nan.

The event was a full house attended by some 200 guests. Many adhered to the theme by turning up dressed in their best ethnic splendour. All in, almost \$8,000 was raised through sales of the lucky draw coupons, scratch cards and donations received for photos taken with the Little Nyonya stars. ♣



From left: Pierre Png, Joanne Peh and emcee Alvin Yapp.

IMMERSING IN CULTURE

Post-graduate students from China steep in heritage at the Tan Chin Tuan Mansion

The Peranakan Association's Vice-President, Baba Peter Wee, shared cultural nuggets and more at a presentation of all things Peranakan at Tan Chin Tuan Mansion on 13 May. The family foundation was hosting postgraduate students from China at its newly-conserved mansion for its Peranakan Cultural Afternoon Tea event.

TCTF's Programme Director, Ms Yap Su-Yin, had sought the Association's expertise to immerse their guests from China in Peranakan culture, as part of the foundation's regular "Tete-a-tete @ TCTF Series" where it brings different partners, charities and beneficiaries for networking, dialogue and sharing sessions.

Besides sharing on the evolution of the Straits Chinese in Singapore, Peter spoke on the Peranakan way of dressing and demonstrated different batik prints used in the kebayas. Also on show were samples of Peranakan kitchenware, family heirlooms, Peranakan jewellery and accessories, as well as photos from the family of the late banker and philanthropist Tan Sri (Dr) Tan Chin Tuan, himself a Baba.

The audience comprised TCTF council members, the Tan Chin Tuan family, the Deputy Chief of Mission and the Education Counsellor from the Chinese embassy in Singapore, postgraduate students from China and staff from the Nanyang Technological University, a varsity supported by the philanthropic foundation.

The event included a slideshow that shared Tan Sri Tan's legacy, Straits Chinese songs sung by the Singapore Chinese Girls' School choir, a tour of the recently conserved Tan Chin Tuan Mansion and nyonya delicacies by Hotel Rendezvous. ❀



Baba Peter Wee explaining the intricacies of batik sarongss.

Photograph by Jacob Kong

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WILLIAM TAN WEE LIAM (1928-2009)

Cynthia Wee-Hoefer pays tribute to one of the greatest Peranakan artistes of our time who passed away on May 27

We will miss the dulcet tones of Baba William Tan. As his godsons and proteges Kelvin Tan and Amos Ling wrote in a homage *pantun* (poem) at his funeral:

***Buah Manggis, Buah Anggur
Manalah Sama Di Buah Delima,
Pa Sudahlah Pergi Jauh
Lain Kali Kita Boleh Jumpa***

How can we compare the celestial pomegranate to the common mangosteen and grape? You have gone far away, we will meet next time.

William Tan, born Tan Wee Liam in 1928, will always be remembered as the well-groomed Baba in his ubiquitous batik shirt and dark pants, spare with words but mellifluous with his *pantuns* and songs. He was the son of Baba Tan Cheng Tin and Bibik Ee Chin Neo and grew up with his brothers and sisters in Kampung Amber in Katong. Later, the family moved to Pennefather Road. He attended Geylang English School but saw his education interrupted by the Japanese invasion of Singapore.

In an earlier interview for The Peranakan Association's newsletter in July 1998, Baba William recalled how he survived the war years working as a coolie for the Japanese forces planting *ubi kayu*

(tapioca) for the soldiers on empty plots where Frankel estate now stands. Following liberation, he worked as a dispenser for Dr Ess in East Coast Road that lasted some 20 years until the doctor passed away. Other jobs followed before he retired to devote time to promote the Baba culture.

As a young lad, William was taken to Sunday musical sessions at Peranakan homes by his father. These exclusively-male gatherings were open to Baba members whose patrons were prominent business leaders and professionals.

Here, he was exposed to the pioneer groups like the *Oleh-Oleh* Party, the Wales Minstrel Party and the Merrilads. What particularly captured his interest was the *dondang sayang* sessions in which eight to nine persons place themselves in a circle and test their wit and idioms of the Baba Malay against each other.

William was to acknowledge repeatedly that the champion of *dondang sayang*, the late Baba Gwee Peng Kwee, was his mentor.

The all-male cultural groups also produced plays and musicals for public fund-raising performances whereby female roles were taken by the male actors. Eventually at the age of 29, William made his debut appearance as Alice in a tear-jerker play *Tidak Berdosa*.

Left: William (on right) with actor Ong Chwee Kim in a performance in the late 1950s.

Right: In a TV show in the 1960s.





He appeared in three more plays and quickly gained a reputation as a refined heroine on stage.

However, his brief acting career came to an abrupt end. He became inexplicably ill, losing his voice before a performance. The doctors could not determine his prolonged sickness and he almost lost his life. Privately, William talked about having a spell put on him by a rival. He then vowed never again to act on stage.

Thankfully, William retained his love of singing and *dondang sayang*. Remarkably for one without formal training in music, he wrote original compositions and sang in both public and at private celebrations. He entertained the elder Sultan of Pahang and his entourage whenever the royal arrived in town.

Among his contributions to the cultural scene of the Baba community were the three plays he directed: *Buang Keroih Pungut Jernih* (1985), *Biji Mata Mak* (1989) and *Tak Sangka* (1990); the sessions he conducted for the members of the Gunong Sayang Association; and the collaborations with authors on the Peranakan Chinese culture.

In 1987, William wrote a *pantun* sung to the tune of *Rasa Sayang* to celebrate the Peranakan Family Mass on the eve of the Lunar New Year at the Holy Family Church in Katong.

He was a devout Buddhist who turned up



regularly for the major services at Mangala Vihara temple and Tirasana Buddhist temple in Katong. At the Saturday wake, a fellow Buddhist revealed how William was foremost in organising the funeral arrangement of temple members.

Kelvin Tan (KT) his other godson whom he had been training to take on the Bibik role shared, "He was a quiet person, always observing. When he gave advice on the correct way of doing things such as speech and mannerism, he would slip it in as an aside, never openly. That was his way of helping others."

William did not marry but left behind nephews and nieces, close friends and numerous associates of the Peranakan network in Malaysia and Singapore. It was only fitting at his wake and final service, that fellow Peranakans played *dondang sayang pantuns*.

Baba Victor Goh Liang Chuan, another of his "students", delivered a touching eulogy and sang "*Tudong Periok*" a song on humility that was William's favourite. ♣

Left: A *dondang sayang* recital in the 1980s.

Right: A portrait taken in 2000.

Middle row: William in his prime as a refined heroine.

Pantun-Pantun Untok Tahun Baru: Sung to the tune of Rasa Sayang. Written in 1987 as his contribution to the celebration of the Peranakan Family Mass held on Chinese New Year's Eve at the Catholic Holy Family Church in Katong.

NOTICEBOARD

VOCALUPTUOUS' LOVE LETTER TO SINGAPORE

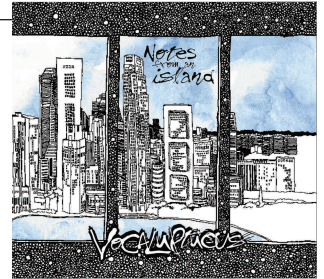
"Classic a cappella brilliance, unbelievable resonant sound." – The Straits Times

It is Singapore's birthday this August, and the ideal time to celebrate all the things we hold dear about our little red dot. Notes from an Island, released last November by critically acclaimed Singapore acappella group, Vocaluptuous, is the group's 'heartfelt love letter to Singapore'. And the culmination of this tribute was their performance in this year's National Day Parade.

Original and contemporary songs in English, Malay and Mandarin leave the listener with fuzzy, warm sentiments of home. Familiar folk songs are woven into contemporary originals like My Old Hometown, Katong and Come Home. Other endearing titles include *Selamat Datang* and *Bunga Sayang*.

Singer/Songwriter and the group's Music Director, Baba John Lee, said: "There are so many things that we love about Singapore, but at the same time, there are just as many things that drive us crazy! And yet, at the end of it all, it's the place we want to be; where we find family and friends with whom to share our troubles and joys." ❀

The sale of the album over Christmas 2008 raised S\$28,000 for Kidz Horizon Appeal, a charitable organisation that attends specifically to children who are suffering from chronic or terminal illness. The album, distributed by Warner Music, is available at all good CD shops. For more information, visit www.vocaluptuous.com.sg



BABA GLEN GOEI'S NEW BLUE FILM

Baba Emeric Lau spotlights a fresh web of Peranakan celluloid intrigue

Director Glen Goei, of local cult film *Forever Fever* fame, is back after more than 10 years with a new movie, *The Blue Mansion*. This major film features a cast comprising the cream of Singapore and Malaysia's acting talent and an international production team. It is due for release on 22 October at Golden Village theatres.

The Blue Mansion is a quirky murder mystery set in a wealthy Peranakan household. A tycoon who dies under mysterious circumstances returns as a ghost to try to uncover the secret of his death with the help of his family and the police. Two eager detectives investigate the death chasing up on all leads and suspects, including the dead man's three



children. The ghost witnesses his own funeral wake, attended by jealous relatives and business competitors as well as the police investigation that unveils hidden family secrets. The movie riffs off the traditional murder-mystery genre, and is set in a context that audiences will find

familiar, yet filled with intrigue.

The stellar Singaporean/Malaysian cast includes award-winning theatre actresses Tan Kheng Hua, Neo Swee Lin and Pamela Oei as well as Malaysia's leading dramatists Huzir Sulaiman, Patrick Teoh and Claire Wong. Other acting veterans include Adrian Pang, Sebastian Tan, Lim Kay Siu and Emma Yong. Many will remember Adrian Pang, Lim Kay

Siu and Pamela Oei from Glen Goei's breakthrough debut film, *Forever Fever* (1998). ❀

For more information about the film, do surf into www.thebluemansion.com



NOTICEBOARD

WELCOME

We welcome our new members

Mr Alistair Chew
Ms Daisy Chua
Mdm Grace Chua Siok Lin
Mdm Jenny Ho Wah Lan
Mr Dieter Klaus Hofmann
Mrs Ivy Swee Gek Humphreys
Ms Audrey Koh
Ms Helence Lim
Dr Frank Tan Eng Huat
Mr Daniel Tan Thean Aun
Ms Yvonne Tan Swee Lin
Mr Daniel Tay Beng Heng
Mr Teo Hock Hoe
Ms Betty Wee
Ms Shereen Wong Mingrui
Ms Yong Hong Choo
Miss Evelyn Chua
Mdm Merlene Ong

OBITUARY

Our deepest sympathies to the family of Mdm Nancy Ong Keng Neo.

BABA CONVENTION 2009: IDOP HADAT BABA!

This 27-29 November 2009, The Peranakan Association Singapore will host the 22nd Baba Convention bringing together the Babas and Nyonyas of Malacca, Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Phuket in renewing their fraternal ties and living the Baba Legacy.

The delegates to the Convention will be treated to a Baba play called 'Bedrooms' (see Chakap Chakap, page 13) at the NUS Centre of the Arts and have an opportunity to visit the Peranakan Museum's Baba Bling exhibition which will be extended specially for the Convention delegates. The Baba play and Baba Bling, amongst others, are all facets of the Babas in Singapore Living their Legacy, *Idop Hadat Baba!*

Please contact our Honorary Secretary, Ms Lim Geok Huay at 9621 0420 or email geok@peranakan.org.sg to secure your seat.

PERANAKAN BALL 2009

Join us in celebrating our 109th anniversary - our annual ball is a surefire night of great entertainment and revelry!

Date/Time: Saturday, 28 November, from 6:30pm

Venue: Padang Ballroom, 4th level, Swissôtel the Stamford

Price: S\$88 per pax or S\$880 per table of 10.

Please contact our Honorary Secretary, Ms Lim Geok Huay at 9621 0420 or email geok@peranakan.org.sg to secure your seat. All cheques should be crossed and made payable to 'The Peranakan Association Singapore'.

PERANAKAN FESTIVAL 2009

Details are in the Peranakan Association advertisement opposite Page 1.

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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

Email: nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg

Tel: +65 6332 2982.

Baba Bling: The Peranakans & Their Jewellery, 29 May -

13 December 2009, Tan Tze

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 are 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>

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.

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/SOA/design_studio/dds2b/blair/study/Blair.html.

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

Katong and Joo Chiat. Perhaps the nerve centre of Peranakan life in Singapore. In its

heyday it was the site of 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.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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