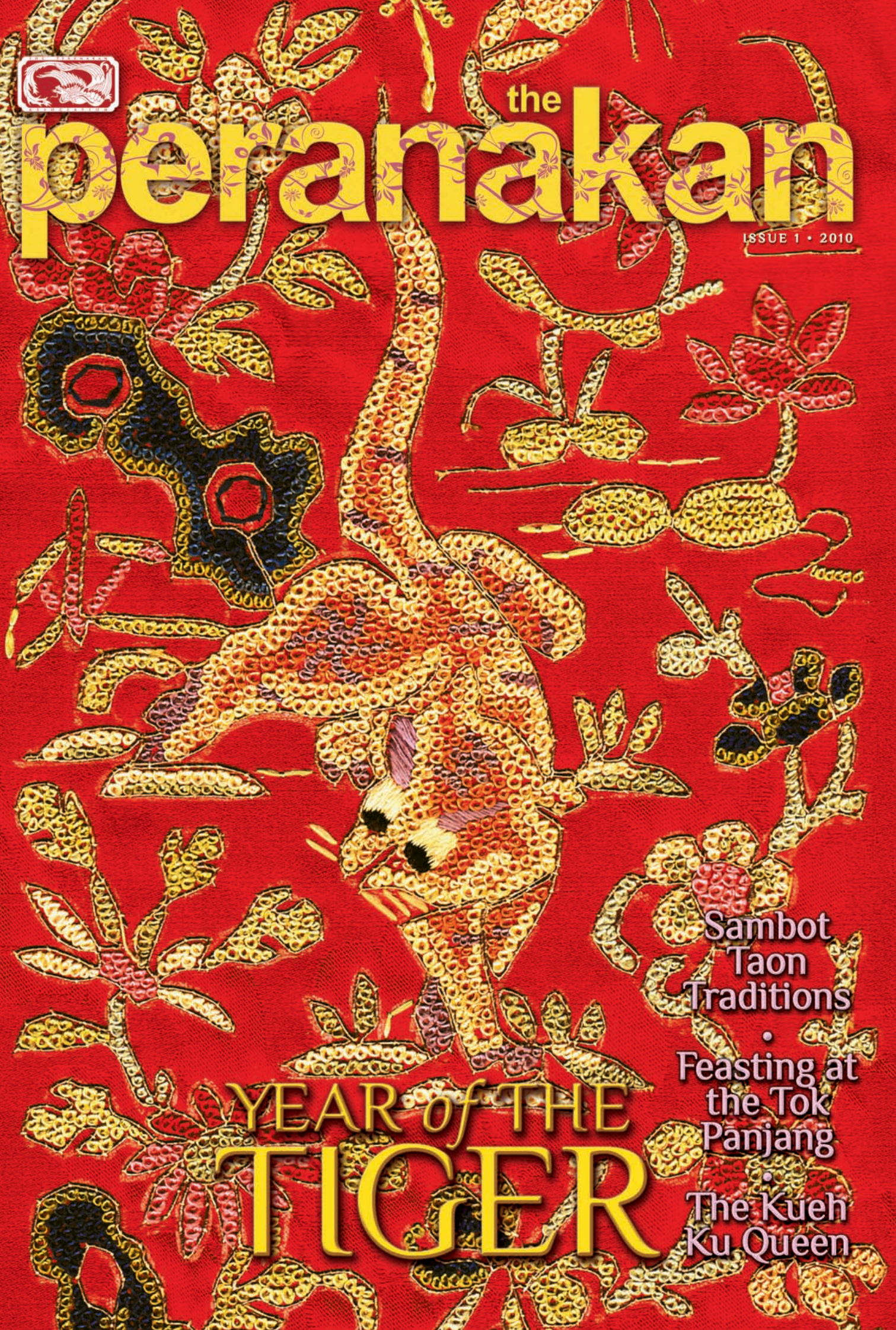




the peranakan

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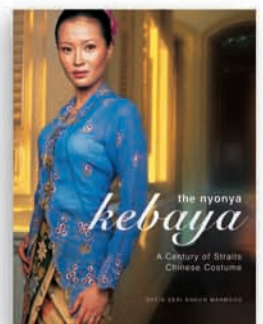
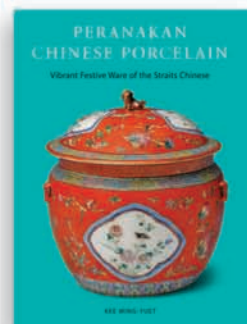
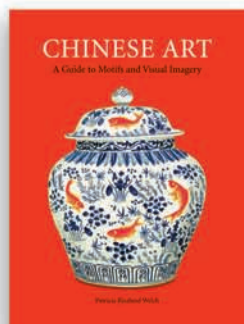
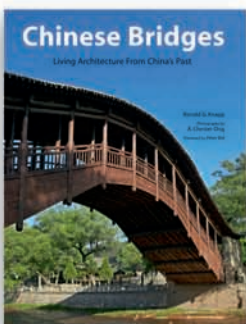
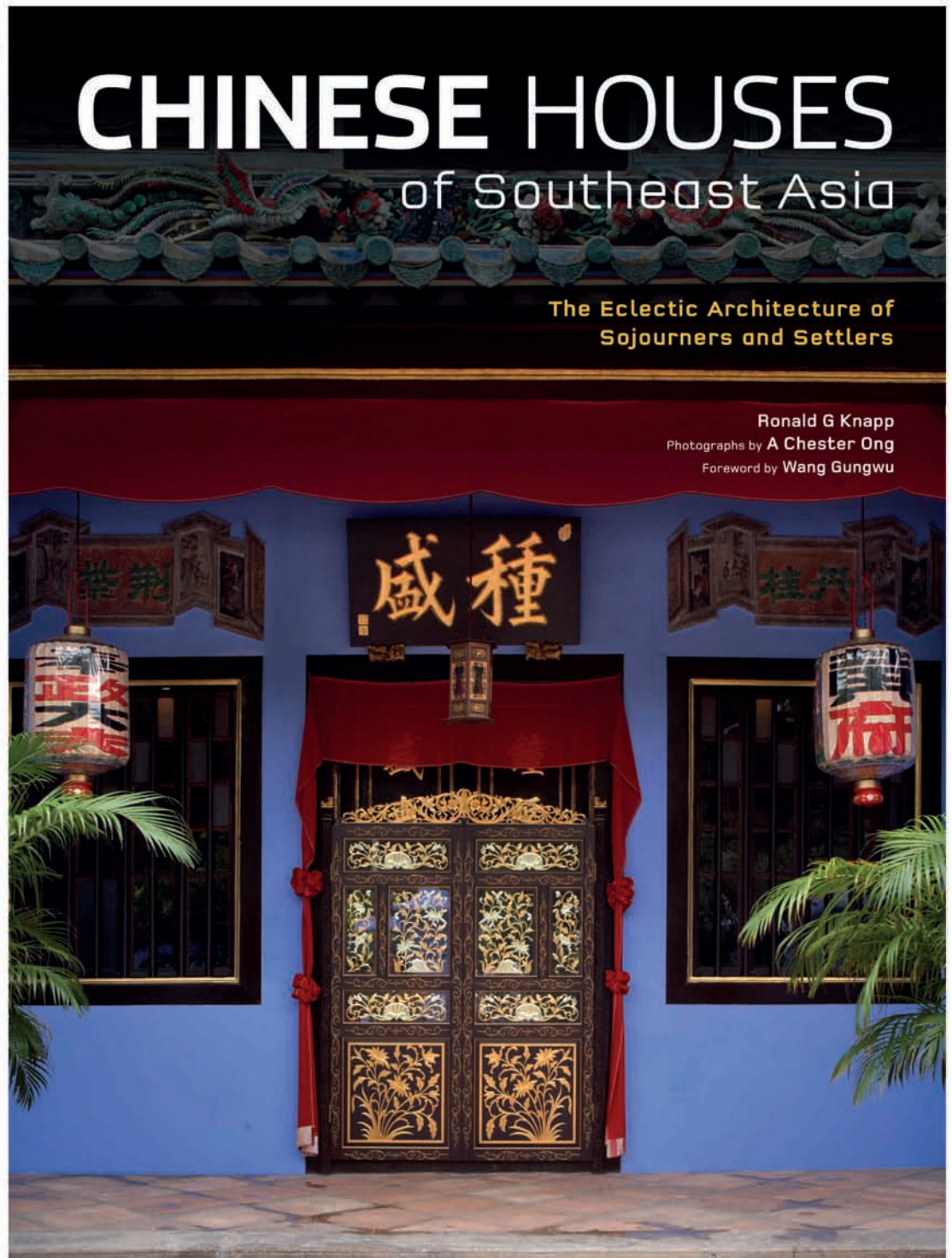
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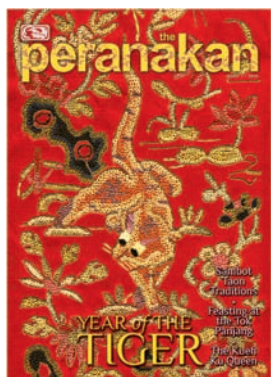
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the Tok
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The Kueh
Ku Queen

The Eclectic Architecture of Sojourners and Settlers



periplus publishing group



On the Cover: Embroidery from a *keong teng* (hexagonal royal lantern used in wedding processions) with a rare tiger motif, owned by the Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum, Malacca.
Photography by Cedric Tan



THE
PERANAKAN
ASSOCIATION
SINGAPORE

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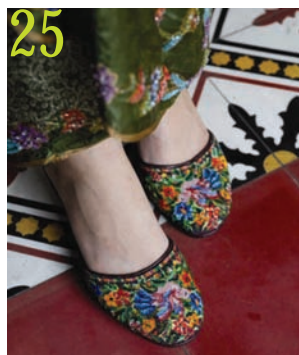
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BRIDGE TO OUR FUTURE

Every year, Peranakans from the region gather in a designated country to participate in the annual Peranakan Convention. This has been an annual practice since the Convention was initiated in Penang by Dato Khoo Keat Siew in 1988. Since then, the regional footprint has expanded to include associations from Penang, Singapore, Phuket, Malacca, Melbourne and the latest baby in the family, Kuala Lumpur. In 2010, Phuket will have the honour of hosting the gathering.

The Singapore Convention 2009 was part of a

When I went home with my cache of nyonya *kueh changs* from Gek's stall, I looked up our website at peranakan.org.sg and saw on the forum another manifestation of this search to belong. The topic of Peranakan family trees – of tracing your own genealogy – was visited over 1,300 times at last count. Amazing.

On Wikipedia, postings on Peranakans have estimated the community to number some seven million people mostly from Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. Besides being termed Straits Chinese or

the Babas for those with Chinese descent, the smaller Peranakan communities include the *Chitty Melaka* (Indian Hindu), *Jawi Peranakan* (Indian Muslim) and *Kristang* (Eurasian).

The many expressions of identification – from events, research and publications, contemporary art and experimental theatre, as you will see in the following pages – have a nice, heartwarming ring to them. Call it a clan, a network, a tribe, or simply the family. This sense of community is the link to our past, and the bridge to our future.

Let us celebrate the coming Year of the Tiger with many things that we can learn from this issue – traditions in the

grand 10-day Peranakan Festival that attracted loads of Peranakans and friends to experience our cuisine, entertainment and other aspects of our culture. For the first time apparently, many Peranakans heard *keronchong* music played live at the Babazaar carnival. The nostalgia was palpable especially for senior babas and nyonyas. Many of us who were there also felt a strong spirit of camaraderie as we indulged in comforting patois-speak.

New Year, the origins of the *tok panjang* traditional recipes for feasting at home, an authentic *kueh ku* recipe from a three-generation legacy, and more.

Panjang panjang umur, murah jereki, badan kuat kuat (long life, abundant prosperity and good health).

Linda Chee

Editor

editor@peranakan.org.sg

LETTERS

Kudos for producing such an impressive magazine. I look forward to every issue and am never disappointed. The articles are informative and well-researched, the subjects varied, the colours as rich as the culture and the design beautiful. It is a publication that does the Association proud!

What a long way it has come from its modest early beginnings. It started out as a newsletter to members and is now a glossy, very professional magazine. My appreciation and thanks to the team. I am sure I am expressing the sentiments of many readers.

Maureen Lim
Singapore

Congratulations on your latest (Oct - Dec 2009) issue. As in the past issues, it's a beautiful piece of work! Having been involved in publications before, I know how much effort (even though it brings a great sense of fulfilment) is involved in getting things together and how more satisfying it is when your work is appreciated.

Like many of your readers (from what I've read in your various issues), I don't throw away the past issues of The Peranakan. They take pride of place on my personal library shelves together with other reading materials to do with the Peranakans.

Ivy Lee
Melbourne, Australia

ADVANCING OUR PRECIOUS HERITAGE

Thank you for supporting The Peranakan Association. For the past 109 years, the Association has served the community and continues to improve from one year to the next. The year 2009 was no exception! My humble belief is that our success can be attributed to our members' focus on advancing the common good of the heritage thus sharing our Association's goals and heritage with the wider society.

With the close and enduring partnerships we have with the National Heritage Board of Singapore, the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Peranakan Museum, the National University of Singapore and the support of sponsors and members, we managed to achieve our goals: to share our precious heritage, contribute towards its development, cater to members' needs, engage young Singaporeans, and build upon strong foundations, while planning for future endeavours.

I sincerely feel proud, and believe that my committee members share in my feelings of pride for the Association's achievements in



2009, especially with the wide range of high quality events during our Peranakan Festival. As members and supporters, you may also rightly partake in these feelings of pride.

On behalf of The Peranakan Association Committee, I would like to thank you for your continued support, and to wish you and your families a peaceful Year of the Tiger 2010, full of health and happiness.

Selamat Taon Baru!

Lee Kip Lee
President
The Peranakan Association

SAMBOT TAON

Baba Cedric Tan checks out auspicious Peranakan traditions to usher in the Lunar New Year

Sambot taon literally means “to welcome the new lunar year”. It consists of a series of auspicious activities to retain good luck from the previous year and to determine if this streak of luck will continue to remain within the family. Associated offerings are symbolic to express the prayers and hopes for a better year ahead. It is an important event to reinforce the tenets of filial piety and gratitude to elders and ancestors and mutual respect to others in our multi-cultural society.

front right and left on the lower altar table while the oranges are elevated to the upper altar flanking the incense urn.

After the reunion dinner, a fresh pot of rice is steamed; part of it is pressed into a conical form in a dessert bowl while the remaining rice is left in the pot overnight in the kitchen to signify a surplus from the year before. Similarly, containers storing uncooked rice and water are filled to the brim. A perforation is made at the apex of the rice in the bowl. Once the rice is cool,



Main hall after the lighting of candles during the Sambot Taon.

Objects

Preparations for *sambot taon* begin in earnest on the eve of the Lunar New Year. Symbols of productivity and prosperity are sought for the altars; three combs of *pisang rajah* arranged in a blooming lotus formation, fifteen skinned sugarcane sticks of equal lengths stacked neatly into a pyramid and twelve mandarin oranges raised three levels high on two *mangkok buah* (fruit bowls). These offerings are banded with serrated red paper and crowned with decorative flowers. The banana and sugarcane are assigned to the

a sprig of spring onion and a bunch of *bunga siantan* (ixora) are placed upright at the apex. The spring onion symbolises life and plenty while the ixora is for good luck. The overall objective is to hope for a better life and perpetuation of the family. Prospects for the future are interpreted from the colour of the mould on the rice just before the altar is cleared on the fourth day of the lunar new year or the day of the heavenly descent of the Kitchen God. The colours of orange, black or both signify good, bad or a combination of both prospects.

Another dessert bowl is filled with water and a young mustard green plant immersed with its roots sticking out.

The vegetable, banded with serrated red paper is known as *teng mia chai* due to its long stem, and is a symbol of longevity. During ancestral worship, the water from the bowl is carefully tipped to the ground to form a circle or protective ring around the offering of burnt joss paper to secure the “gifts” to the intended party and to ensure that the offered materials will not be hijacked by other spirits. The *sambot taon* offering on the main altar is left untouched during the first four days of the Lunar New Year to protect the family’s blessings.

Another object of importance is the *huat kueh* (steamed sponge cake) and *kueh bakol* (steamed glutinous rice flour cake) pyramid symbolising abundance or prosperity. The cracked and overflowing *huat kueh*, made from either tapioca or rice flour, is stacked on top of one or two *kueh bakol*. Each layer of *kueh* is decorated with red strips of serrated paper and the topmost *huat kueh* adorned with flowers. This object is placed in the centre of the lower altar table and flanked by the rice and mustard greens on the right and left respectively. Together, these three objects represent the *siew*, *hock* and *lock* (longevity, wealth and prosperity) in order from left to right.

Sometime fresh sugarcane plants are placed behind the main door similar to the practice of the *Chitty Melakas* on Ponggal day. However this practice has disappeared as the skinned sugar cane is preferred.

Preparation

When evening falls, everything should be almost ready to usher in the New Year. By now the red *chaiki* is already affixed to the main door posts while the family *tengs* (lanterns) are seen hanging above the porch of the house. The guest tables are covered with a colourful *kain jong* (velvet floral cover) and matched with an eye-catching flower-laden *epergne*. Intricately crocheted chair covers are laid on the various teak chairs and secured with red ribbons. New curtains adorn the windows and doorways leading to the interior of the house. Silver and brassware shine brightly after the final polish while porcelain for serving guests are given a good cleaning and set aside.

The final evening prayers for the year are held as a precursor to the main ceremony on the New Year morning. Once the evening prayers are over, new candles are placed on the brightly polished brass candle stands and a more outstanding *tok wi* (table valance) draped on the lower altar table. Offerings for the *sambot taon* are arranged neatly on the altars together with clean tea cups, *teh liao* (sweetened assorted coloured crackers) and sometimes the *chanab*. The floor will be given another round of mopping as it is taboo to sweep the floor on New Year's Day. When all preparations are completed, the main door of the house is bolted shut and can only be opened when the hour to *sambot taon* arrives. No one will be allowed to exit or enter through the main door. If you need to leave the house, you can only do so via the back door. In the past, this was a convenient excuse to get everyone to turn in early in anticipation of a busy and tiring day ahead.

Taon Baru

The hour to *sambot taon* varies from family to



family but generally it is between 6 to 8 o'clock in the morning. The family lanterns are lit and every light in the house is switched on to attract good luck. A simple ceremony is held in the Main Hall facing the main door of the house to usher in the New Year. The Peranakans do not adhere to the time assigned by astrologers as this is a recently introduced practice to welcome the God of Prosperity into the home.

After the morning bath the family members don their new clothes and join the head of the house to offer prayers to *Ti Kong* and other deities. To the strains of recorded *seroni* music and the scent of the *stangee*, the head of the household will open the main door, light the candles and pour tea at the main altar. Raising the joss sticks to their foreheads and kneeling at the main door, each member of the family will silently utter a prayer of thanksgiving and seek blessings for themselves and their family members before planting the joss sticks in urns at the various altars in the house. After burning joss paper in the shape of gold ingots to offer wealth to their ancestors, firecrackers are set off to mark the end of prayers. The din from the firecrackers is believed to ward off evil spirits and create a mood of festivity. By mid morning, everyone's porch and the entire street would be blanketed in red as neighbours compete to set off the longest and most number of firecrackers, a thrilling annual event for all the children! In Singapore and Malaysia, firecrackers have been banned since the early 70's but the tradition is fondly remembered by many who experienced the raucous merriment of those days.

Respect

Seniority is based firstly on generational standing then age. Thus the *Ng Chek* (youngest paternal

The orange mould on the rice on the fourth day of the Lunar New Year and other offerings.

FEATURE

uncle) of the family may be younger than the oldest nephew but he is still more senior in rank. Seniority for members of the same generation is based on age irrespective of gender. Spouses automatically assume the same status as their partners. Thus, everyone has a full understanding in matters regarding kinship and decorum and is able to address each other correctly. Harmony is achieved when order is maintained.

At the family gathering, members arrange themselves in order of seniority with the most senior couple seated regally at the head of the table. Starting from the next most senior couple or individual, they will pay homage to the eldest; the males *sohja* by kneeling and clasping their



Facade of the house with lanterns on the eve of the Lunar New Year.

hands to *kowtow* (bow their heads) while the ladies *sembah* by kneeling while clasping their hands. The juniors will address and wish the elders *panjang panjang umur*, *murah jereki* (long life and lots of prosperity) and in return will be given blessings such as *sama-sama untong* (together we prosper), *cepat-cepat besair* (to grow healthily), *panday-*

panday surat (excel in studies), *untung-untung slalu* (profitable in business) and *rengan-rengan jodoh* (obtain suitable life partner easily). Elders in their august years and/or the sickly may prefer the wish for a healthy body (*badan kuat-kuat*) instead of prolonged life (*panjang umur*).

This ritual will be followed by an exchange of *ang paus* (red packets containing money) between the married and elders while unmarried adults and children will be rewarded with *ang paus* after paying their respect to elders. The unmarried adults will be constantly teased that this year will be their last when they are handed their *ang paus*. Newly married couples will receive a pair of red candles in lieu of *ang paus* in their first year of marriage for good luck. They will in turn take their seats for the juniors standing in line to pay their respects.

Dedications to the Year of the Tiger

Anak dara tepi laot
Makan jambu sama lemo
Tua muda hoahi sambot
Taon baru taon harimo

Young maidens relaxing by the sea
Rose apples and tangerines they all savour
Old and young herald with glee
Lunar New Year, Year of the Tiger

Harimo dihutan buat sulaman
Kain keong teng Taon Baru
Popi panday sama peng an
Sama naik negara maju
Prowling tiger, the theme of embroidery
On imperial lanterns this Lunar New Year
Bless us with peace and dexterity
Together we and the country prosper

by Baba Cedric Tan

Bunga berbagai mekar di taman,
Harumannya menarek ramay orang,
Sudah tiba masanya keluarga sama kawan,
Bikin hoa hi, rayakan sama jorang!
Varieties of flowers blossom in the park,
Their sweet scents attract so many.
Certainly the time for my family and friends,
To celebrate and rejoice with everyone.

Taon Rimau datang kembali,
Hoa hi di hati semoa rayakan.
Oh Adek, Ng Ko sama Tachi,
Ikutlah chontohnya luas pandangan!
The year of the tiger comes once again,
With joy in our hearts we celebrate it.
Oh my younger sibling, elder brother and sister,
Let us emulate its qualities to be wise in our ways.

Harimo belang merayau hutan,
Rumahnya disana daging makannya.
Keong hi lau sit saya ucapkan,
Mintaklah peng an semua di popinya!
The striped tiger roams in the forest,
Its home is where it finds its sustenance.
I take this opportunity to sincerely wish,
Blessings and great peace to everyone.

by Baba Christopher Lim

FEATURE

Continued from page 6

In Malacca, family members will commence their New Year visitations with the first stop at the centuries-old Cheng Hoon Teng, fondly known as *Kebun Datok*, to pay homage to and seek divine blessings from *Hood Chor* (Guanyin) and their ancestors. They will then drop by the family ancestral home and light joss sticks to *sohja abu*. Relatives are visited in order of seniority which usually takes many hours up till night. It is common for elders to *dudok rumah* (sit at home) and to wait for the yearly visits by younger relatives.

In the old days, children would be sent to deliver home-made delicacies in a *bakol siah* (lacquered basket) to their non-Chinese neighbours. This was done to reciprocate the gifts they sent during their own festive season. The *bakol siah* would be returned filled with either fruits or sweets. It is not a practice to give anything except *ang paus* to the juniors, as festive gifts are already exchanged the week preceding the New Year.

Another unique practice by some Peranakan families in Malacca is to visit the tombs of their ancestors on the first day of New Year. This is a quaint practice adopted from the Malays who offer *fatihah*, loose flowers and scented water to deceased relatives at their tombs after morning prayer. The Peranakans

will instead honour the deceased with fruits and incense at their graves.

Taboos

Up till today, some families are strict about the attire worn on New Year's Day - men are to wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts complete with matching tie while the ladies must be appropriately attired. Black attire and silver-pearl accessories are frowned upon.

They should also avoid using harsh words or raising their voices and be extra careful when handling breakable materials. Manifesting anger or breaking something is seen as a sign of disunity for the family.

On the important issue of retaining luck in the house, no one is allowed to sweep the floor on the first day and all brooms and dustpans are kept hidden out of sight.

Those in mourning will refrain from celebrating the festival and visiting anyone and their homes will not be one of the stopovers in the visitation list on the first few days of New Year. It will be the duty of close relatives to present gifts of *kueh bakol* and other New Year delicacies to these unfortunate kinsmen who are customarily not allowed to bake these cakes.✚

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FEATURE

AT THE TOK PANJANG

“The Best *Tok Panjang* Buffet In Town” – a familiar tagline touted by hotels and Peranakan restaurants in recent years. What exactly is a *tok panjang*? Baba Norman Cho explains

Tok *panjang* is a curious combination of the Hokkien *tok* (table) and the Malay *panjang* (long) to literally mean a *long table*. The precise context for the *tok panjang* is the luncheon that is traditionally hosted at the respective homes of a bridal couple on the eve of their wedding. A long rectangular table would be set up with chairs lining both sides of the table. Unlike the Western custom, both ends of the *tok panjang* are left vacant to be joined with more tables should additional guests turn up. If the table stretches too long, another parallel row of

In the old days, up to a few thousand pieces of the finest *famille rose* enameled porcelain were known to have been used to host the *tok panjang*. The very colourful *famille rose* porcelain were China-export wares which were customised for the Peranakans and commonly known as *nyonyaware*.

Borrowing nyonyaware

Families have been known to borrow *nyonyaware* from one another to make up the quantity required during huge celebrations. As the *nyonyas* ate with

their fingers, cutlery and chopsticks were conspicuously absent except for the Chinese-style porcelain soup spoons, ladles and a finger bowl or two. Also absent from the table were the *kam aus* and *kam chengs* (porcelain storage pots). These delicate articles would not have survived such a communal dining experience.

Western-style dining, the *tok panjang* is devoid of accessories like flowers and *epergnes*. The feast is enough to bowl anyone over: a riot of colourful plates and bowls laid right across the table with rich, sumptuous mouth-



A tok panjang feast among the ladies c.1950. (Photograph courtesy of Ong Chwee Im)

tables is opened up, similar to a Malay wedding banquet.

Male guests would dine first. But did you know that the *tok panjang* was primarily intended with the ladies in mind? It was meant for close female relatives and friends who had helped out in the wedding preparations, including the maiden daughters.

You may have frequently heard people erroneously saying *makan tok panjang*, literally, eating the long table when it should be *makan laok tok (panjang)* – eating food at the (long) table. Another term *chiah tok (panjang)* means an invitation to dine at the (long) table. Interestingly, the formal wedding banquet held in the evening is laid out on separate tables instead of the *tok panjang*.

watering favourites like *chap chai*, *hee pio* soup, *itek sio*, *satay babi*, *ayam masak buah keluak*, *sambal udang*, *sambal timun/nanas* and *sambal jantong*.

Like the Malay wedding feast, the same dishes of food are placed at regular intervals along the table so that every dish is at arm's length – Peranakans are not in the habit of passing food around the table. Desserts, called *chuchi mulot* (refreshing the palate), are varied. They include *pengat*, *onde onde*, *kueh ee* and are served at the end of the meal, usually placed separately from the dining table.

In the old days, the daughters-in-law of the family would usually wait at the table to assist in topping up the food and drink. All the food was home-cooked with the help of the family *chongpo* (male

cook). Towards the middle of the 20th century, catering food from Peranakan specialty restaurants became a more popular option when hosting the *tok panjang*. The caterers, usually Hainanese, would provide not only the sumptuous food but would also supply the nyonyaware as well. They even provided a team to wait on the guests. With all these conveniences, it was little wonder that the Peranakans chose this alternative.

Our last tok panjang

While I never had the chance to experience the traditional *tok panjang*, my paternal grandmother recalls the last *tok panjang* feast that my family hosted in 1923 at the wedding of her elder sister (my second grandaunt). Our family home was a shophouse – literally a shop-cum-residence. The shop's display cabinets at the front hall had to be moved to make room for guests when business was closed for the day.

The *tok panjang* was set up in the second hall. To cater to the huge extended families and lacking space, the luncheon was served in several sessions, according to the seniority of the guests. Grandmother was only 10 years old then. The event was intimidating. Unfamiliar guests had come from nowhere to enjoy the *tok panjang*. As many as twelve or more dishes were served.

The curious little girl that she was, grandmother

scurried to the kitchen, then to the dining hall and to the bridal chamber. She peeped at the *chongpo*, the *ah-sum* (maid) and her elder sisters busy preparing the dishes in the kitchen. Everyone was jostling for space and a small fire almost broke out when someone accidentally spilled some oil-based gravy near the charcoal stove! Nyonyaware was expensive and our family had only a limited collection. The crockery had to be quickly washed and dried to be ready for use at the next session.

Back in the dining area, the *bibiks* (elderly nyonys) broke into noisy chatter, gossiping across the table. I am sure some comments were about the food; every nyonya would think she was the best cook and could do the best *tok panjang*. In the bridal chamber, grandmother could hardly recognise her elder sister who was being prepared as a *kemanteng baru* (new bride). She was breathtakingly beautiful.

Since those days, the *tok panjang* has evolved. Families can now eat out at restaurant-style buffets where you pile on food from a central spread and then make your way to your own little tables. For practicality and cost reasons, plain crockery has replaced nyonyaware. The powerful advertising entices families, Peranakans and all outside the community, away from home cooking to the convenience of the present-day *tok panjang*. ❖



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A TRADITIONAL NEW YEAR DINNER WITH JOLLY AND VIOLET

Chinese New Year gatherings are nothing without the closeness of family and sumptuous food. Like other ethnic groups, Peranakans have their own favourites. Dalam Dapor has the privilege to share with readers recipes of traditional Peranakan cuisine that Baba Jolly Wee and wife Violet serve at

home for their family's Chinese New Year Eve dinners.

"These are the quintessential dishes that will be found in most Peranakan homes during Chinese New Year," says Uncle Jolly. "For dessert, we could have a variety of nyonya kueh, agar agar or even cheng tng."

RECIPES

Note: All recipes are for 5-6 servings. Chicken seasoning powder is used here for your convenience but if you have the time, chicken stock derived from boiling chicken bones is always preferred for its natural sweetness.

AYAM BUAH KELUAK

Rempah (spice paste)
Minimum 10 good quality *buah keluak* nuts (soak for at least 3 days)
1.5kg whole chicken
150g onions (sliced)
10g *galangal* (sliced)
10g fresh turmeric (sliced)
3 candlenuts
50g lemon grass (sliced)
30g *belachan*
70g tamarind paste mixed with water
30g chilli paste (to mix with the blended spices)

Preparing the buah keluak

Use a chopper to split the top part of the *keluak* nut, where the colour shade is slightly different. Scoop out the pulp with a teaspoon and blend with 1 tablespoon of sugar and 2 thinly sliced *lemo purot* leaves to make a paste. Divide into two portions of $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$ and use the $\frac{1}{4}$ to mix with the *rempah* ingredients. The rest are to fill the nuts.

Cooking method

Clean and chop the chicken into several portions according to your requirement. Season with

salt and pepper. Heat the cooking pot on medium fire and stir fry the blended *rempah* and *keluak* mixture until fragrant. Add the seasoned chopped chicken and stir fry for 2 minutes. Add enough water to cover the meat. Season with 1 tablespoon chicken seasoning powder and a pinch of salt to taste. Cook for 20 minutes on low fire. Do not put in the filled *keluak* nuts at this stage. Before serving, warm up the dish on low fire, add the *keluak* and simmer for 5 minutes.





BABI PONGTEH

Main Ingredients

1kg pork belly
3 garlic, chopped
200g bamboo shoots
5g dried mushrooms
125g blended small onions
2 tbspn coriander powder
(*ketumbar*)
2 tbsp fermented soya bean

paste (*tauchio*)
2 tbsp dark soya sauce (*tauyu*)
2 tbsp sugar
4 tbsp cooking oil

Cooking Method

Wash and dice the pork belly. Soak mushrooms in hot water for 20 minutes. Dice the bamboo shoots. Mix the blended onions, chopped garlic,

coriander powder, soya bean paste, sugar and dark soya sauce in a bowl. Heat up the oil and stir fry the mixed ingredients. Stir in the pork, bamboo shoots and mushrooms. Add enough water to cover the ingredients. Bring to boil and simmer on low fire for 45 minutes until pork is soft. Garnish with sliced green chillies.

CHAP CHAI

Main Ingredients

500g cabbage
100g pork belly
10g dried black fungus (*bok ji*)
5g dried lily buds (*kimchiam*)
10g sweet dried beancurd (*tim cheok*)
20g dried vermicelli (*tang hoon*)
10g dried mushrooms
10g dried prawns
3 cloves fresh garlic
10g fermented soyabean paste (*tauchio*)
1 tbsp dark soya sauce (*tauyu*)
5 tbsp cooking oil
1 tsp chicken seasoning powder

Cooking Method

Wash and cut cabbage according to your preference. Soak the dried fungus, lily buds and *tang hoon* in water, separately, for

10 minutes. Cut the dried bean curd sheets into several portions and soak for 5 minutes. Wash and boil the dried mushrooms in a small cooking pot with 1 tablespoon dark soya sauce, simmering over low fire for 20 minutes. Wash and cut the pork belly into thin slices and add to the simmering mushroom mixture. Cook for another 10 minutes.

Heat up the *tauchio*, add all the ingredients including the cut cabbage and stir fry before adding in the pre-cooked mushroom and pork belly mixture, including its stock.

Cook over moderate fire for 25 minutes. Lastly, add in the softened *tang hoon* and simmer for another 10 minutes. Serve with *sambal belachan*.



DALAM DAPOR

HEE PIO SOUP

Soup Stock Ingredients

300g soft pork ribs
50g dried scallops

Main Ingredients

200g dried *hee pio* (fish maw)
200g dried pig tendon
200g sea cucumber
200g fish balls
100g pork balls
300g cabbage

Cooking Method

Soak the fish maw in water to soften before cutting into several

portions. Soak the tendon in water. Cut the sea cucumber and cabbage according to your own preference. Put all the ingredients into the soup stock, bring to

boil and simmer for 20 minutes. Add salt, chicken seasoning and a little brandy to serve. Garnish with chopped coriander leaves.

Photography by Colin Chee



UNCLE JOLLY FINDS A SUCCESSOR

Baba Colin Chee tracks down the lucky fellow

Octogenarian and Peranakan Chef Jolly Wee and wife Violet have finally found their successor. The lucky fellow is none other than Concorde Hotel's Executive Chef Robin Sing.

"Our children are doing very well in their own areas of expertise and have never shown an interest in taking over what we do," explained Uncle Jolly. "When he first entered the kitchen, I greeted him as my *shifu*," said Robin. "This made him happy. He felt accepted." Unashamedly 52, Robin has over 35 years of French, American, Mexican,

Japanese and Chinese cooking under his belt.

"I had researched him before he came, and even though I had a two-year stint at Apollo Hotel which was known for its own Peranakan buffet, I knew I

was not up to Uncle Jolly's standards. I didn't know what was the authentic Peranakan taste. Now I can tell the difference between *rempahs*, the subtle differences in spices, the different sauces, how to cut and slice the condiments and herbs.

"That's why I love to cook and eat his *laksa*. It

is Peranakan *laksa*, so genuine. You can taste the spices that go into it, and so different from the ones that I call Singapore *laksa*, where the coconut milk overpowers the spices."

Robin proved such an enthusiastic and able disciple that Baba Jolly and Violet adopted him as their godson to inherit their cooking secrets and skills, within two weeks of getting to know him. "Our chemistry is good, lah," said Robin.

This enthusiasm for Uncle Jolly's cooking is also shared by Concorde's Sous Chef Ken Tay. The 30-year old is literally Uncle Jolly's hands and legs in Spices kitchen. "The first few weeks Uncle Jolly was here, we could not understand him," said the young chef of 10 years. "He was using Malay words like *buah keluak*, *bakwan*, *udang nanas*. But we soon got to understand each other better."

"I basically had to learn to cook all over again because Peranakan cooking is so different from French and Italian. It is a lot more difficult and exciting.

"We had to learn to prepare different curry powders for different types of meats and seafood. The type of *bee hoon* to use for *laksa* had to be taken from one particular source, not any old how. The *belachan* paste cannot look black but must have a certain pale colour which had to come from only one particular source," said Ken. ❖



Successor Robin Sing (left) and Ken Tay.



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DALAM DAPOR

KUEH KU QUEEN

Baba Peter Lee interviews Nyonya Yap Buong Neo, whose mother, Tan Dang Neo (1895-1974), was well-known in Katong for her *kueh ku*, which she made and sold from her house in Kampong Amber



Photographs courtesy of Yap Buong Neo.

Right: Tan Dang Neo's wooden house in Kampong Amber, c. 1970s.

The traditional Peranakan *kueh ku* or 'tortoise dumpling' is an apt expression of the cultural adaptations of the Chinese diaspora. The term itself expresses this evolution. Tortoises are a traditional Chinese symbol of longevity, and auspiciously red tortoise-shaped cakes with mung bean filling known as *ang ku kueh* (red tortoise dumpling) are traditional Hokkien pastries served at birthdays and offered at feast days of Chinese deities, such as at *Ti Kong Seh*, the birthday of the Emperor of Heaven on the 9th day of the new year.

The Hokkien word *kueh* (for a cake or dumpling) entered the Malay vocabulary some centuries ago, and to complicate matters further, the Peranakans of old decided to refer to this Hokkien pastry in a manner that conformed to Malay grammar, with the noun before the adjective, rather than in the Chinese way with the adjective preceding the noun. The Hokkien *ang ku kueh* therefore became the Baba Malay *kueh ku merah*. Moving south, the recipe was embellished with lacings of rich coconut milk in its dough, and scented with the subtle

aroma of tropical *pandan* (screw pine) leaves.

Shirley Yap Buong Neo is a nyonya preserving a three-generation legacy of traditional *kueh* recipes. Her grandmother Wee Hup Soon (1869-1944) was widowed soon after giving birth to three daughters, and was forced to eke a living making *kueh*, which was collected every evening from her house in Haig

Road by two Cantonese ladies who sold them from house to house. Tan

Dang Neo (1895-1974), Wee's middle child, carried on this family tradition, when forced to fend for herself

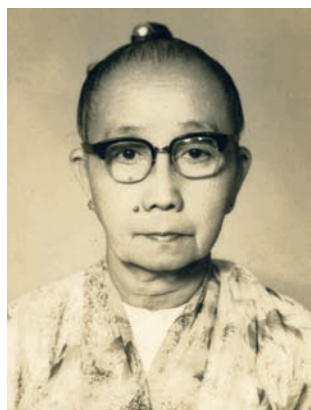
during an unhappy

marriage. Her husband Yap Lay Swee was the over-indulged only son in a family of six daughters who lived in a large house in Geylang. Days after marrying Dang Neo, he ventured off to Hong Kong on his own, returning after two weeks with a Cantonese sing-song girl in tow. She was soon followed by five more concubines.

Twelve Births

All this came to an end when the Yap family lost their home in Geylang. Dang Neo moved back to her mother's house, together with the Cantonese concubine and her profligate husband (the other ladies having abandoned him), and continued helping her mother in her *kueh* business. There followed the birth of 10 children all of whom died in infancy. Thanks to the Kandang Kerbau Hospital and modern science, the 11th child, a boy, and the 12th, Buong Neo, survived. The boy was given to the Cantonese concubine and Buong Neo to her uncle until the age of three, as their mother was convinced they would not live if raised by her. When Dang Neo saved up enough money she bought a load of wooden planks to build a modest residence in Kampong Amber, on a large piece of land owned by the estate of the late tycoon Lee Choon Guan, who allowed villagers to build houses on it rent-free.

In the early 1950s, Dang Neo started perhaps the first Peranakan *kueh* stall in a coffee shop in Ceylon Road with her husband and two sisters, but when he kept all the takings for himself, she started her own stall in Marshall Road, which only lasted some months as her husband continued to be a nuisance with his frequent visits to her stall to demand money. She finally returned to making *kueh* at home, and it was from there that Dang Neo became famous for her *kueh*, and especially the *kueh ku*, through which she earned the nickname Bibik *Kueh Ku*. In the kampong, she was loved for her generosity and care, and was affectionately called 'Mama' by all. ❖



Tan Dang Neo, c. 1950s.

Kueh Ku mould belonging to Tan Dang Neo's mother, Wee Hup Soon.



IN THE OLD DAYS

Daughter Buong Neo helped out from a young age, and recalls those tiring days of the New Year, just before Ti Kong Seh, when *kueh ku* offerings were made for sale:

“In the old days before the war, my mother ordered about 100 katis (about 60kg) of *pulot* (glutinous rice) from a Chinese provision shop. The rice was soaked for three hours, then ground twice in a *batu boh* (granite mill). I used to help my mother pour the rice into the *batu boh*. Three Malay neighbours helped her in the kitchen: Mak Edah who ground the rice, Mak Enon who washed, husked and cooked the *kachang ijo* (mung beans), and Kak Jenab, who was a general housekeeper. They were paid by the kati of *pulot* that was made. The wet ground rice was then placed in a sack, and the smaller granite slab of the *batu boh* was placed on top of the sack to weigh it down and to express the water, for about two hours.

The *kachang ijo* took a long time to prepare. The beans were roughly ground in a *batu boh*, then soaked for 2 hours and washed with well water several times. The skins or shells floated up and were removed with a sieve. The last wash was with clean tap water. The bean was then steamed with lots of *pandan* leaves for about an hour, and in between water was sprinkled to ensure it did not dry out. Then the bean was ground into a paste in a large brass *gringsing* with a wooden pounder rather than a stone *lesong*.

The consistency of the milled rice was like dough. My mother kneaded the rice dough together with the *santan* (coconut milk) and a pinch of *inchee* (or *yanchi merah*, or in Hokkien *ang hoe y hoon*, red dye powder). The dough was filled with the *kachang ijo* paste and shaped in the *achuan* (mould). Although she was quite small my mother could carry and work with the heavy wooden *achuan* with ease. She inherited this mould from her mother, and it was passed down to me. Last year I gave it to the Baba House.

My mother never used sweet potato in her dough, unlike Mrs Leong Yee Soo. This was because my mother soaked her rice before milling, and so the texture of the pastry would be sufficiently soft. Mrs Leong made her dough



out of dry glutinous rice powder, which if not soaked, or without the sweet potato, would result in a tougher, more chewy pastry.

Kueh ku Colours

There were five colours for *kueh ku*: red, black, blue, green and white. The black was derived from *daon ramay*. The dried leaves were soaked in water for an hour with *abu kueh chang* (lye ash). The water was discarded and the leaves boiled with *abu kueh chang* until soft, then pounded. The juice was mixed with the dough. The blue was obtained from *bunga telang* (blue pea flower), and the green from a combination of *daon pandan serani* (large screw pine leaves) and normal *pandan* leaves, which were pounded and then the juice squeezed a few times.

The process was repeated till the colour of the leaves faded. The juice was strained and boiled in high heat with some *kapor* (white lime powder). When the water boiled, only the top was skimmed, and the rest of the water discarded. This top layer was a thick and green fluid, suitable for colouring *kueh*. White *kueh* were for funerals and made to order, with a different type of mould.

She would make all four colours for festivals at the Mangala Vihara Buddhist temple. Normally she would make *kueh ku* in the four colours for sale too, always with *kachang ijo* filling, and never with peanut or grated coconut, like in the Hokkien version.

At *Ti Kong Seh* before the war, my mother would sell only the red ones in a set comprising one *kueh ku besair* (50 cents), medium-sized *kueh ku* (30 cents), *kueh ku kechik* (10 cents), *kueh ee* (10 cents), *kueh piti* or *kueh pichi* (20 cents). Customers would normally order sets of 8 or 12. From the evening of the seventh day until midnight of the eighth day, people would queue to buy her *kueh ku*.”



Yap Buong Neo demonstrates the preparation of her mother's Kueh ku.



BIBIK KUEH KU'S VERY OWN KUEH KU RECIPE (by her daughter Shirley Yap Buong Neo)

Dough

200 ml coconut milk (*santan*)
2 tablespoons fine sugar
2 *pandan* leaves
600g glutinous rice flour (preferably from Thailand)
A small pinch of *inchi* (or 1/8 teaspoon of red food colouring)

Soak the rice flour a day before making the dough, changing the water every 3 hours or so, stirring with a clean wooden spoon rather than with the hand (this ensures the flour does not turn sour). Then put the soaked flour in a cheesecloth, tie it up and weigh it down to remove water, until the rice is firm and dough-like. This ensures the texture of the pastry will be soft.

Heat the coconut milk with the sugar and *pandan*, turning off the fire immediately after the mixture reaches boiling point (this prevents it from turning sour).

Remove the soaked rice flour from the cheesecloth and place it on a wide dish or board. Make a hole in the dough and slowly knead in the coconut milk together with the *inchi* or food colouring. Knead the dough until firm, adding more flour or milk as necessary. Set aside.

Filling

600g mung bean (without skin)
500g fine sugar
A few pieces of *pandan* leaves

Soak the beans for 2 hours, and steam them for 1 hour with *pandan* leaves until soft, sprinkling the beans with water every 15 minutes to ensure they

constantly remain moist. Pound or grind the cooked beans, then stir them in a wok over a low flame until the paste is firm. Let the paste cool before rolling them by hand into walnut-sized balls.

Moulding and steaming the kueh

1 cup of peanut or vegetable oil with soaked *pandan* leaves
1 *kueh ku* mould (the modern plastic ones are best)
Banana leaves (*daun pisang*), trimmed to a size slightly larger than the mould

Pull a portion of the dough and roll it into a ping-pong sized ball then flatten it. Put the ball-shaped filling in the middle and wrap the dough around it. Pull off any excess dough. Coat the *kueh ku* mould with the oil and press the filled ball of dough into the mould. Remove from the mould and place pastry onto the trimmed banana leaf. Trim leaf further to desired proportions if necessary (only a thin border of leaf should be visible).

Steam the *kueh* for at least 8 minutes. Remove the *kueh* and lightly brush it with the *pandan* oil. Cool *kueh* to room temperature before serving.

This recipe makes approximately 40 medium-sized *kueh ku*.

Photography by Jason Ong

Read more about Tan Dang Neo in *Junk to Jewels: The Things that Peranakans Value*, Peranakan Museum, Singapore, 2008, p. 31 & 48.

Shirley Yap's handmade kueh ku is available at Katong Antique House, fresh deliveries every Sunday. Kueh ku is also available at Rumah Bebe and Kim Choo Kueh Chang



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motif.*

CHAKAP CHAKAP

MAKING JEWELLERY COME ALIVE

Baba Colin Chee interviews a master craftsman of Peranakan jewellery

When Master Craftsman Lim Foon Yan passed away late last year, jeweller Foundation grieved but did not lose a beat. Arguably Singapore's only Peranakan jewellery atelier, Foundation had ensured the continuity of its business by making sure Foon Yan's brother, Lim Teck Ngian, would carry on the long and demanding tradition of Peranakan jewellery craftsmanship. A Master Craftsman himself with over 40 years to his credit, Teck Ngian was his brother's only protégé. Teck Ngian speaks about the challenges he faces.

Just how difficult and how long does it take to pick up the skills to make Peranakan jewellery?

We all know that the skill to make fine and elaborate Peranakan jewellery is fast fading away and getting lost with each new generation of craftsmen. You can count on your fingers today the number of such

craftsmen who are able to make Peranakan jewellery in Singapore and Malaysia. Every piece of Peranakan jewellery, if it is to be made well, has to be hand-made and hand-finished individually and by very skilled people who have the passion for the

craft. An elaborate piece of jewellery can take as long as six weeks to make. A simple piece like a small ring can take up to two weeks, on average. And this does not include the time spent conceptualising the initial design. Just simple arithmetic tells you a Master Craftsman can only average about 10 large pieces a year. This is not enough to make a living unless there are willing buyers for these pieces at a high enough price.

So, the challenge is to find someone who is willing, with the right aptitude and attitude, to learn the basics for five years on average initially. He must also realise that buyers of such jewellery are not to be found in the mass market but are discerning customers.

Do you foresee a time then when there won't be anyone left to carry on this tradition of Peranakan jewellery making?

It is possible that one day we may lose this tradition of craftsmanship altogether. Because the newer generation of craftsmen is not willing to invest time to acquire the necessary skill when there is this mass market jewellery that is getting ever more popular, and which requires less skill to make. It will be a pity the day we lose our tradition. As it is, there are some pieces of Peranakan jewellery made 50 years ago that we are not ever going to be able to replicate. The skill to do that is gone, and it will take just too much time to make too!





What is the most important and most difficult thing to craft in very fine Peranakan jewellery?

It is making the piece of jewellery come alive from whichever angle we look at it.

Mass market jewellery is generally flat and rough on the edges. Very fine jewellery is almost three dimensional. When we craft a bouquet of flowers on a piece, we always ask, do the flowers look like they are blooming? Do the leaves look like they are dead? When we want an animal like a lion in a piece of jewellery, our challenge is to make it look like it is stealthily stepping out of the surrounding jungle. If it is a phoenix, we ask if it looks like it is about to fly? They have to look alive. This requires a lot of time and skill in carving the gold piece or silver piece according to our design, choosing the right stones to go into that piece of jewellery, polishing and then setting the stones into that piece of jewellery in a way that the reflected light and angles ensure the flowers and leaves and animals and birds speak to those who look at them, and making sure the edges of the jewellery are smooth to the touch.

Is it true then that all old Peranakan jewellery is very fine and well-made?

There will always be very finely made and very badly made jewellery. How can we assume that all old jewellery is good and therefore worth paying good money for? The important thing is to see the craftsmanship that has gone into making one. Is the piece of jewellery so good it can talk to us? Not all craftsmen are up to the mark. This is no different in the past than it is today. So, it is not about when a piece of jewellery is made but by whom. Unfortunately for Peranakan jewellery of old, we do not have any record of the master craftsmen responsible for the very fine pieces. And they don't



Teck Ngian at work crafting this beautiful kerosang with a lion motif (left). It all starts with a fine pencil drawing on tracing paper (above).

sign the pieces. But we can say there were probably many more masters in the old days than there are today. This we can be sure about.

I am told in the old days, and even today, Peranakan master craftsmen like to say they are masters of silver jewellery and not gold jewellery. And they brag about that. Is this true? Why is this so?

Yes, it is very true. If you look at the silver-pearl jewellery that's made for occasions of mourning, the material content may be less valuable than the yellow gold-*berlian* versions that we usually see. But the time and skill that have gone into making those pieces are considerably more. For instance, each pearl is different in shape from the other. The jeweller therefore has to individually set these pearls according to their respective shapes and how each will look as part of the overall design. ✧

OH, JOY!

Nyonya Linda Chee smiles at Baba painter Desmond Sim's happy little nyonyas

Desmond Sim's delightfully light-hearted, languid world of the Peranakans took centrestage once more at his latest exhibition on happy little nyonyas at Utterly Art. *Oh, Joy!* reflects the laid-back, easy going life of a fun-loving community that extends to gossipy *tachis* (older sisters or cousins), hush hush murmurs about the *bachik's* (youngest brother) latest romances, babies to adore and more.

Titles such as *Flights of Imagination*, *Surprise*, *Mischief*, *Bliss* and *Baby Baba's Big Day* open a window to the themes that the prolific playwright-poet-author-painter fondly subscribes to. Into his 10th solo exhibition since 2004, Desmond has consistently focussed his passion on Peranakan aesthetics of abundance, beauty and plenty of love all around.

As Desmond says, "Peranakans always seem to know how to be happy. Even in tough times. We

are really the opposite of the long-suffering and bitter characters portrayed in fictional media. We are actually happy and jolly as a culture. It is almost as if we have the secret to a joyful life.

But it is not really a secret. Joy lies in simplicity..."

This Baba's prescription for life? "Live intensely. Give wholeheartedly. Learn to laugh a lot... at yourself, at others, at the world. Don't worry too much. Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to love. Love more. Want less. That is the secret to a happy life. So simple, babies do it."

Desmond's solo exhibition, from 1 – 13 December, sold very well with new works snapped up by local and foreign collectors.✧

Desmond's works can be viewed at Utterly Art, 2nd level, 229A South Bridge Road (diagonally opposite the Sri Mariamman Temple, Pagoda St Exit). Tel: 6226 2605 or 94872006 (Keng Hock).

Email: utterlyart@pacific.net.sg



Right: *Flights of Imagination*.

Below: *Phoenix at Rest*.



PERANAKAN TIONGHOA INDONESIA

Baba William Gwee Thian Hock reviews a lavish new book about the culture of the Peranakan Chinese of Indonesia

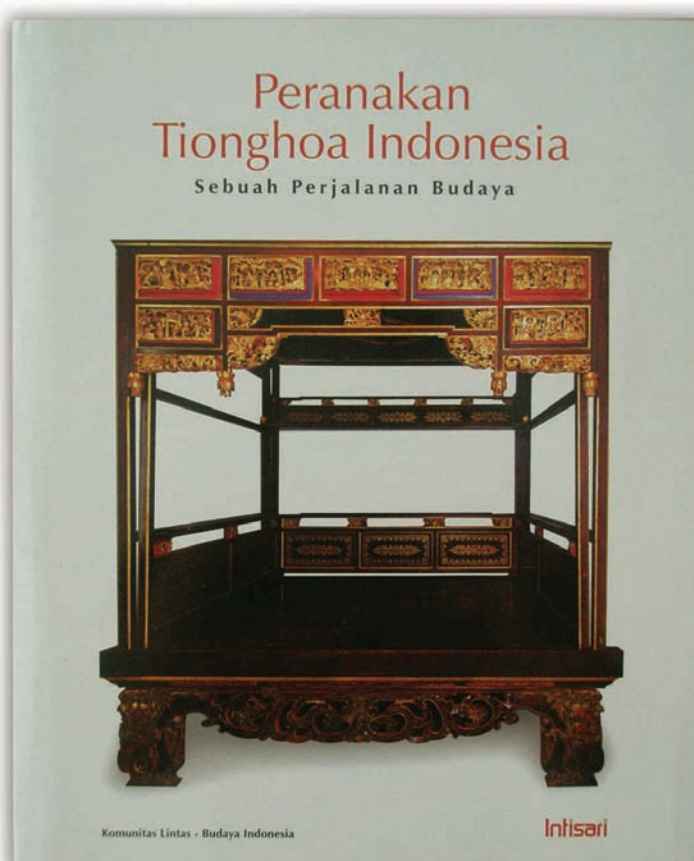
During the exhibition *Warisan Budaya Tionghoa Peranakan* (The Cultural Heritage of the Peranakan Chinese) held at the *Bentara Budaya* in Jakarta in January 2009, the organiser *Komunitas Lintas Budaya Indonesia* also launched a new publication, *Peranakan Tionghoa Indonesia: Sebuah Perjalanan Budaya* (The Peranakan Chinese of Indonesia: A Cultural Journey), which is a profusely illustrated book of 352 pages. Its contents include 12 essays on various aspects of the culture of the Peranakan Chinese of Indonesia. (See report: Peter Lee, 'The first Peranakan Festival in Jakarta', *The Peranakan*, April-June 2009, p. 36).

In his foreword, the organiser Irwan Julianto discusses the spirit of reconciliation manifested by Nelson Mandela and the late Martin Luther King Jr, both of who closed a chapter on racism and discrimination in their respective countries. He hopes that similar problems faced by the ethnic Chinese of Indonesia may end with their full participation in nation building to achieve a one-people concept. A positive sign is the unique acculturation throughout Indonesia's islands and provinces by the ethnic Chinese, which has encouraged the exhibition and the book.

The Baba Peranakan community in the Straits Settlements originated in Malacca. The origins of this community are similar to those of the Peranakan Chinese of Indonesia in that early male Chinese migrants in these regions married local women, which eventually resulted in a community generally termed 'Peranakan'. Here the similarity ends because the Peranakan Chinese of Indonesia, spread out over a larger geographical area, have a much more complex history.

Unlike the Baba Peranakans of the former Straits Settlements who have much more in common with each other, the Peranakan Chinese of Indonesia have much more regional variations and differences in cultural practices, showing the influences of local customs. This becomes very apparent in the articles by the eight celebrated contributing authors of the book.

Written in Bahasa Indonesia, this book may prove a drawback to Peranakan cultural enthusiasts unfamiliar with the language. But all is not lost particularly to those in possession of basic Malay and Baba Malay language skills, a reliable



Indonesian-English dictionary and a determination to surmount the language difficulty. The only shortcoming is the inferior binding, which causes the pages to come loose when the book is held fully open.

With its highly informative articles and a profusion of colourful photographs, this book is a steal at Rp 400,000 (about \$60). It is highly recommended, well worth the buy and deserving pride of place on one's bookshelf. ✧

To view William Gwee's synopsis of the various essays in the book please visit:
http://peranakan.sg/bookreview/Tionghoa_Indonesia

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A PERANAKAN LEGACY

Baba Colin Chee thumbs through a showcase of Peranakan everyday life

“I am planning a book that will show part of my collection,” Baba Peter Wee told me some months back.

“That should be interesting because I am sure you have a lot tucked away in various corners of your house,” I replied, not wanting to say anything more or I would sound like I was prying.

I thought nothing of it after that. Then some months later Peter called to say self-effacingly, “The book is ready. See if it is worth a review.”

Unlike many publications on Peranakan culture today which tend to focus on the ‘glamorous’ side of things with pictures of beautiful museum-quality porcelain and textiles, Peter’s *A Peranakan Legacy* recognises that many Peranakans do not live in luxury.

The book showcases the heritage of the Straits Chinese people. Following a concise introduction of what this shrinking and once influential and wealthy minority community represents, readers are introduced to Peranakan culture, customs, traditions and daily life through the artifacts of the Peranakans’ everyday life.

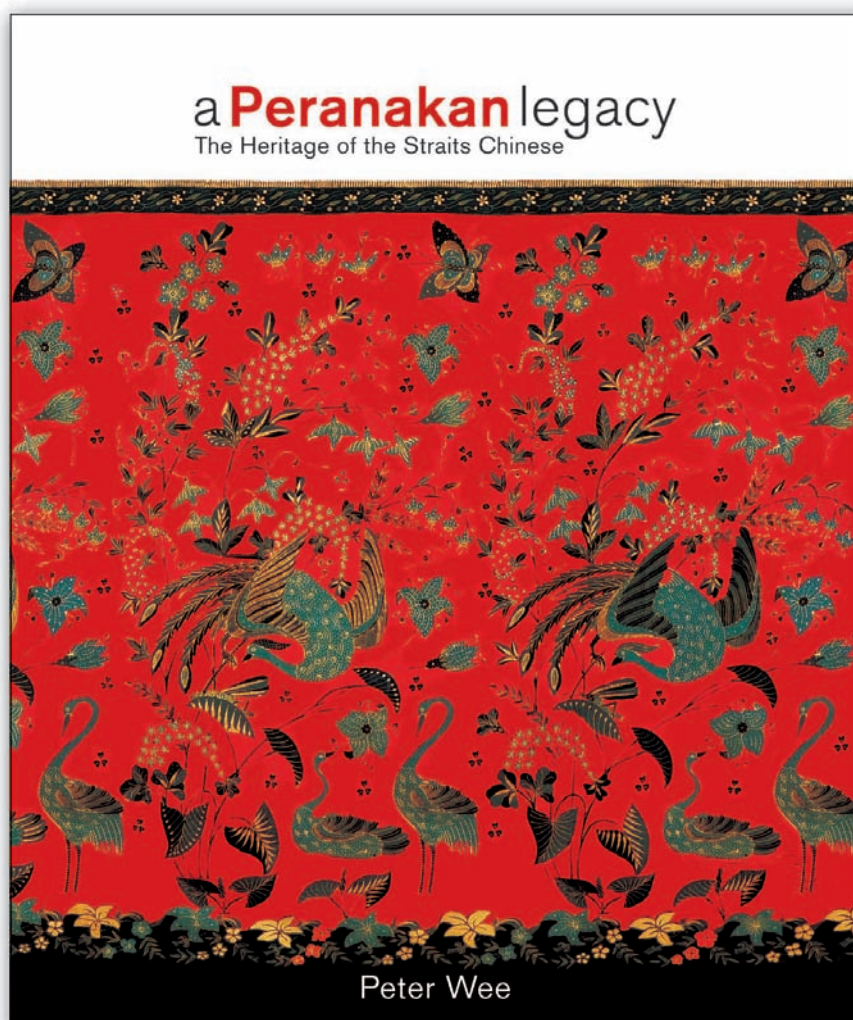
The book features elaborately embroidered *kebayas* and beadwork alongside mundane household utensils such as moulds for making *kueh pie tee* and Chinese New Year cakes like *kueh bolu* and even *tengkats* and spittoons that are a part of every traditional Peranakan home.

Melvin Neo, the project editor who is Peranakan,

conceived the idea for this book in 2008 and approached Peter Wee as he is one of the doyens of the culture. Writer Brenton Wong spent many afternoons interviewing Peter, drawing out amusing anecdotes and interesting nuggets of information.

The editor and art director also went through Peter’s treasure trove of artifacts to select what seemed like good representations of the way Peranakans lived before arranging the series of photo shoots.✧

A Peranakan Legacy is published by Marshall Cavendish International. The book retails for \$34.78 with GST and is available at all leading bookstores and Katong Antique House.





PINANG PERANAKAN MANSION



THE PINANG PERANAKAN MANSION TAKES YOU BACK TO THE TIME OF THE BABAS AND NYONYAS, SET IN THE HOME OF ONE OF PENANG'S HISTORICAL PERSONALITIES, KAPITAN CINA CHUNG KENG KWEE.

Depicting the typical home of a rich Baba of more than a century ago, the opulent lifestyle of these locally acculturated Chinese is recreated in the Pinang Peranakan Mansion to offer a glimpse of their many customs and traditions. More than just a Baba-Nyonya museum, this century-old stately mansion of eclectic design and architecture incorporates Chinese carved-wood panels with English floor tiles and Scottish iron-works. Built at the end of the 19th century by one of

local history's famous personalities, the 'Hai Kee Chan' or Sea Remembrance Store had once served as the residence and office of Kapitan Cina Chung Keng Kwee.

At the Pinang Peranakan Mansion, the legacies of the Peranakans are not only commemorated but the restoration of this building complex also heralds the preservation of Penang's unique architectural history.

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LOCATION MAP



A PASSION IMPRINTED

Nyonya Linda Chee marvels at the beauty of a revived art form, now recorded by the doyenne of Peranakan beadwork

Bebe Seet's *Peranakan Beadwork, My Heritage*, reflects the lushness of our culture in perhaps the most intricate of all Peranakan art forms done by members of the community. More than a mere accessory, the dainty beaded slipper (*kasot manek*) was in the Peranakan heyday a symbol of patience and diligence - highly desirable traits of a nyonya and a status symbol as only wealthy and cultured ladies could afford the time for such a refined pursuit as beading.

Many nyonys, and nowadays even the babas, would while away the hours painstakingly lifting, with a fine needle from little dishes, tiny glass beads (*manek potong*) the colours of jewels to stitch onto slipper fronts. The young ladies would embroider slippers and other elegant accessories for their wedding trousseau while married nyonys added more items to their utterly colourful yet coordinated *kebaya* wardrobes.

This once-dying art has been documented in Bebe Seet's book which I believe is the first of its kind in the wide documentation of Peranakan culture. It reads like a compendium of all you need to know about Peranakan beading. In fact, two-thirds of the book is on techniques and guides that recall the look of a Readers' Digest how-to manual.

For a nyonya like me, without the patience of Job to ever think of beading to take up my precious time, I was particularly fascinated by how Bebe tries to trace the lost art of threading. It remains a missing link that she is still trying to uncover. "No patterns related to this technique were ever found, nor are there any existing nyonys left retaining such skills," she says. Her passionate pursuit is reflected in research and experimentation to recapture this lost art, getting inspiration even from an American Indian technique.

Bebe gives an indepth account on the types of beads, materials and slippers. The slippers are essentially the *kasot tongkang* (shaped like the

bumboat of the early Singapore River era) paired with the *baju panjang* (long dress), and the *kasot serek* (Malay for drag) to complement the fashionable *sarong kebaya* that overtook the *baju panjang* in popularity. Various collectibles in other forms are also showcased, plus Bebe's efforts at contemporising beadwork onto handbags, ankle-strap high heels and even embellishments for teddy bears!

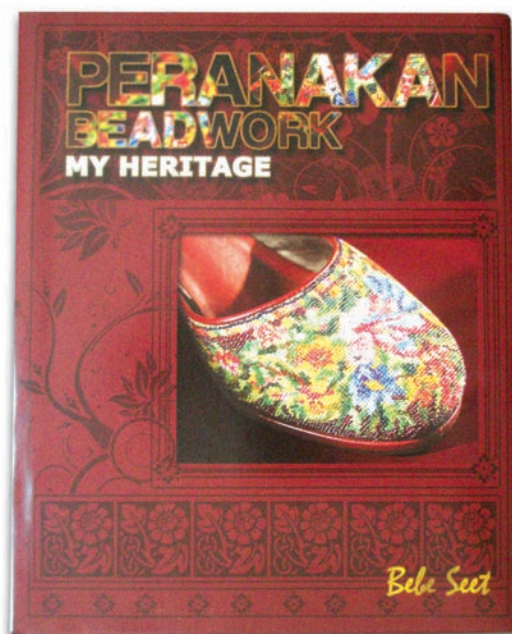
As a production, the book would have benefitted from better design and layout to bring out the full glory of the rich embroidery and elaborate beadwork. While the instructional aspects could not be faulted, more concise copy and better organisation of material could have sharpened the focus of informative chapters such as 'Beadwork Collection'. For instance, Bebe's investigation of the lost art of threading could have been elaborated in one chapter instead of receiving mentions in separate chapters.

This however does not detract from the fact that as a

document of Peranakan culture, the book carries gems of history and knowledge through Bebe's keenly felt passion and years of beading, collecting and teaching, for which she so rightly deserves the title of doyenne of Peranakan beadwork.

Peranakan Beadwork: My Heritage is a must-have for those with an interest in Peranakan culture, and for Peranakan beading enthusiasts in particular. As Bebe says to the reader, "I hope this book will persuade you either to start beading or, if you have already started, to enjoy it even more." ❖

Published by Bebe Seet in 2009. Available at Kinokuniya, Select Books and all Banyan Tree museum shops.



Left: One well-dressed teddy bear.

BEDROOMS: BREAKING NEW GROUND FOR PERANAKAN THEATRE

Baba Emeric Lau dissects the elements of a happy marriage

Staged first in Baba Malay and then in English, *Bedrooms* / Bilek Roda Hidop played for almost a fortnight from 25 November to 6 December at the University Cultural Centre Theatre, NUS. It is believed to be the first time a Peranakan play has been staged consecutively in two languages. Each version featured a different cast and director, thus yielding two artistic perspectives on the same script, albeit in different languages. I was privileged to have attended both stagings, and am examining the two as halves of a whole production.

Concerns about Peranakan *wayang* becoming incomprehensible to generations of English-speaking

Singaporeans are not new. In Felix Chia's Foreword to *Pileh Menantu*, a play widely acknowledged for reviving Peranakan theatre and published in 1984, Chia states that he regards English education as one cause of the erosion of Baba culture. Ironically, the script for *Pileh Menantu* that follows is printed in both Baba Malay and English, with one language per page on facing pages.

Audiences who attended both versions

of *Bedrooms* were, understandably, inclined to draw comparisons, including reviewer Cheah Ui-Hoon of The Business Times who dubbed the effort an "interesting experiment". Cheah went on to write that the Baba Malay version "made you think ...the play was a bit of a drag, with no real point to it, while the other [the English version] you appreciated for its succinct script and revealing dialogue."

Still, for anyone somewhat familiar with Singapore's theatre community, such an observation would hardly be surprising. In a sense, one is already acquainted with the dish about to be served. From pre-show publicity releases, it was clear that the play would be a family drama revolving around a young nyonya and the ways she is taught to view marriage. The members of both casts are mostly theatre fixtures in their own circles; an audience would come expecting certain levels of dramatic flair and acting prowess from each. The audience attends the play not really itching to know what happens so much as *how* it happens.

In the Baba Malay version, the cast of Cynthia Lee, Mabel Lee, Frederick Soh and Peranakan theatre doyen G T Lye all hail from a community theatre background. Besides looking their parts, their experience with Peranakan *wayang* and ability to speak Baba patois made them all shoo-in choices from an already very limited pool of talent. Nonetheless, not being full-time actors worked against this cast and they visibly stumbled in their handling of the rather verbose script. It was Lye's portrait of the acidic Bibik Cheng with a heart of gold that salvaged the show. His sheer stage presence and ability to become one with his character made for a riveting performance that easily outshone those of his co-stars. His character's final line before succumbing to cancer, a crudely hurled "*Yao siu!*" drew laughter, empathy and clearly struck a chord with many in the audience who recounted that they knew some elderly relative "just like Bibik Cheng".

Directed by Zizi Azah, *Bilek Roda Hidop* could have benefitted from tighter editing and swifter pacing. Still, this version comes across as a valiant attempt to stage a high quality Baba Malay play in an era where both the talent to mount and the audience numbers to appreciate such a production



Anna Belle Francis as the bride (left) and Neo Swee Lin her adopted mother in the English version.



The bride with her biological mother, played by Nora Samosir.

are fast shrinking. The English version featured accomplished theatre director Alvin Tan, dramaturge Haresh Sharma, veteran actresses Anna Belle Francis, Neo Swee Lin and Nora Samosir and television hunk Julian Hee. As is to be expected with such luminaries, this version proved to be a slick, professionally-executed production. The female characters bristled at the right moments, exchanged well-enunciated barbs with ease and threw in several Baba Malay phrases to add spice, while Hee shed his clothes on cue. With the script meticulously pared and edited, the show bounced to a close just under the two-hour mark, including intermission. It was a pleasant evening's entertainment, yet it felt strangely lacking in heart.

Bedrooms underscores an evolution for contemporary Peranakan Theatre. Some would regard staging a Peranakan play in English as akin to staging Shakespeare with the bard's iambic pentameter rewritten as prose. Questions thus raised are: can we still accept the final product as a Shakespearean play? What is it that makes the



experience *authentic* for an audience? Is the English version any less *authentic* than the Baba Malay one?

When both versions are considered as halves of a whole, *Bedrooms* / *Bileh Roda Hidop* is really about paying reverence to a traditional art form by gently nudging it back into relevance.

Unlike the young couple in the play, the outcome of mounting *Bedrooms* in both Baba Malay and English is a happy marriage that highlights the best of traditional Peranakan *wayang* and the vast potential of drawing from contemporary theatre – may we soon see more of such “experiments”! ❖

Left: Matriarch G.T. Lye in the Baba Malay version.

Right: The dying scene where the matriarch is comforted by her daughter Cynthia Lee (middle). Mabel Lee plays the foster mother in the Baba Malay version.

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NIVEA AD

REFLECTIONS: AYER PASANG AYER SURUT

Baba Emeric Lau observes that grassroots *Wayang Peranakan* remains very well-watered

I must confess upfront that it isn't an easy thing for this MTV-fed, Theatre Studies and Drama-trained Baba to relate to the brand of *Wayang Peranakan* that the Gunong Sayang Association has faithfully promoted for the past quarter century. Indeed, *Ayer Pasang Ayer Surut* (Ebbs and Flows) that played from 23 to 25 October is the 99-year old Association's 22nd production since 1985.

At what has become an annual highlight on the Peranakan community's calendar, the audience was treated to the usual scenes of comedy and drama interspersed with musical entertainment. The plot of *Ayer Pasang Ayer Surut* revolves around a Peranakan family's travails between the 1960s and 1970s as they see their fortunes rise, fall and rise again.

Baba K.T. comes into his own with a demanding role playing Matriarch Seet Chwee Neo, who has her hands full ensuring the smooth daily running of her household while preventing her feuding daughters-in-law, Nancy and Betty, from mauling each other. Particularly memorable is this play's long-drawn out "weeping scene" where KT succeeded in generating ample pathos as Chwee Neo reflected on how tough her life had been.

Betty, played by Maureen Lim, bristles with jealousy towards Nancy, played by Irene Ong, who hails from a rich shipping family that has fallen on hard times. While all issues are resolved by the end of the play, Betty appeared far too vindictive towards Nancy. More suspense could have been provided if Nancy's angelic personality was tweaked to supply an occasional cause for doubt.

Nonetheless, the audience was amply supplied with all the surefire crowd-pleasers:

- Melodies by Dendang Irama Band, led by *Encheh* Yahya Arshad
- Songs from the Bibik Singers, Philip Lye and Shirley Tay
- *Dondang Sayang* by KT and Jessie Cheang
- Bawdy humour from Baba Y M Lee, who concluded his act with the *Ding Dong Song*
- The bellowing Sunny Toh with his trademark "*Huat Ah!*"
- Veteran Francis Hogan in a guest starring role as *Jantok*, the fortune teller
- Nyonya Irene Ong, who juggles the roles of

actress, secretary, scriptwriter, lyric composer for the theme song and subtitler, notes in her programme message, "At its core, (Peranakan culture) celebrates family loyalty, and this has never wavered." The same can be said for the loyal legion of Gunong Sayang fans who have unwaveringly turned up year after year to show their support for this unique brand of *Wayang Peranakan*; long may it continue to be celebrated.

This reviewer has been informed that for their 100th anniversary this year, Gunong Sayang Association will be staging a shorter new play coupled with a medley of favourite scenes from past productions - definitely something to be highly anticipated! ✧

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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EVENTS

PERANAKAN FESTIVAL TOTALLY BABA-BOOMZ!

Baba Emeric Lau reports on the new perANAKan energy emanating from the Peranakan Festival

A common theme across many of the events under The Peranakan Festival 2009 was the involvement of younger people both within and outside the community who came together to ensure its success, discovering common interests and making new friends in the process.

Prior to the Festival proper, a *Malam Baru* or Evening of the New was held at the National Library Building's Pod. Against the shimmering backdrop of the Singapore skyline, the evening's line-up served as a teaser for the bounty of younger talents that the Festival would boast. Guests included long-time friends and supporters of The Peranakan Association, selected members of the media, the Association's main committee and festival sub-committee, and the Festival's contributors, collaborators, sponsors and supporters. It was a gathering of like minds, with many amongst the older generation expressing delight at the interest that young Singaporeans are now taking in Peranakan culture. In keeping with Peranakan style, the

presentations at *Malam Baru* were rounded off with a simple but elegant Nyonya buffet dinner.

On Saturday, 26 November, the Peranakan Festival 2009 opened at 12 noon, officiated by The Peranakan Association President Baba Lee Kip Lee and Baba Peter Wee at the Babazaar, held at the air-conditioned Singapore Management University (SMU) Concourse. The non-stop 'live' entertainment that ensued proved a hit. Throughout its two days, crowds flocked to watch the performances at the main stage, causing a constant bottleneck between the food and craft sections of the fair – not that anyone minded! Nothing beat tucking into some crunchy *pie tee* while listening to soothing renditions of classic songs.

Amongst the many performing groups were the Angklung Ensemble of Pei Tong Primary School, a Brass Collective comprising students from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and a Gamelan Band from Republic Polytechnic. These young performers charmed the audience, garnering many

new fans. Also featured were Gunong Sayang Association's Dendang Irama Band, The Association of *Chetti Melaka*, Main Wayang Company and The Peranakan Association's very own Peranakan Voices.

Baba Art

The Baba Art exhibition held at the SMU Concourse, as reported in the last issue of this magazine, featured three young artists who created pieces inspired by Peranakan culture. Perhaps the icing on the cake for Mardiana Binte Jamaludin, Herman Salleh and Michelle Lim was finding that their artistic interpretations of the culture were appreciated: all three saw some of their paintings sold.

Upstairs, four independent artists, Milica Bravacic, Jenny Sim, Anthony Tan and Ms Cho exhibited their Peranakan-inspired creations at the SMU Gallery. The Baba Art exhibition, endorsed by the Singapore Design Festival 2009, provided an interesting

Left: The appreciative crowd.

Right: Mari-lah joget!





insight into the variety of styles that can come under the umbrella of contemporary Peranakan art.

PeRUN!akan

Sunday 29 November saw the Babazaar becoming the beginning and end points of the last leg of peRUN!akan, a part-online, part Amazing Race-styled competition where Internet savvy youths could learn more about Peranakan culture as they raced to solve puzzles and answer questions at a dedicated website, named www.perunakan.sg. Online interest reached fever pitch: over 2,200 facebook profiles joined the competition's fan page, and at one point, the organising committee even had to contend with hackers who awarded themselves winning scores! Fortunately, with adequate measures in place, it was easy to identify the legitimate competitors.

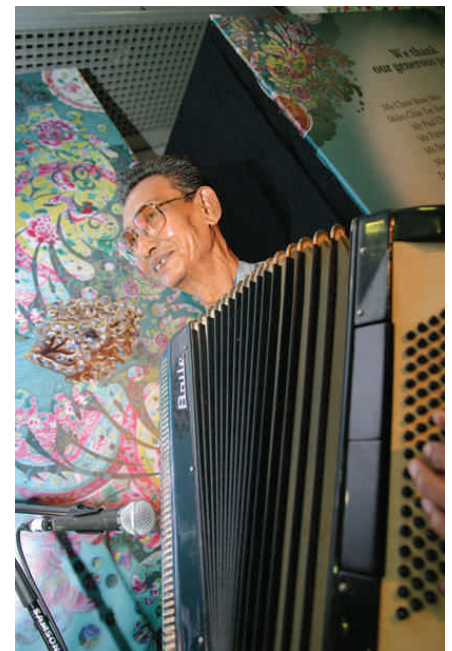
This last leg saw participants rushing to various locations as they tried to beat one another and be the first to return. At the Singapore Coins and Notes Museum and Singapore Philatelic

Museum, they had to find the answers to a couple of questions related to the artefacts on display; they had to obtain a sticker from the Peranakan Museum. The Singapore Mint, which manages the Singapore Coins and Notes Museum, was also the gracious sponsor of the event's cash prizes, and the Peranakan Museum assisted with generating questions on the culture throughout the competition. The competition was organised, executed and attended by youths, and the grand prize winner walked away with \$3,000 in cash. Other winners took home tech-related prizes and smaller cash amounts.

Lastly, we must not forget to thank the many young (and young-at-heart) individuals who worked and volunteered together to organise the entire Festival behind the scenes. We hope to have more initiatives that will continue to ignite passion for Peranakan culture. If this year's Festival is any indication, we can certainly trust this new generation of perANAKans to assume stewardship of their heritage as we sail into the 21st century and beyond.❖

Left: The Gamelan musicians from Republic Polytechnic.

Right: Angklung melodies from Pei Tung Primary School.



Above: Dendang Irama.

Bottom left: Lagu-lagu keronchong.

Bottom right: A comic multi-racial parody.



EVENTS

BABAZAAR: THE BIGGEST & THE BEST!

Baba Gavin Gareth Chan gets *lagi* (more) Babalicious!

The biggest & BEST Babazaar that was held on 28 - 29 November as part of the Peranakan Festival 2009, transformed the usually quiet corridors of the Singapore Management University's (SMU) underground concourse into a bustling extravaganza akin to a fancy dress party. It felt like a revival of the most delightful kind.

nyonya laksa, and *babi pongteh*, who could resist the temptation to tuck in? Certainly not when the food was from renowned names such as Kim Choo, Guan Hoe Soon and Concorde Hotel.

Try the *otak* or sample the *itek sio*? How about some *chendol* or *kueh salat* to go with that? Visitors were absolutely spoilt for choice, but the most important thing

was to present Peranakan cuisine in all its delicious glory, and hardly anyone left the Babazaar with an empty stomach.

And the most chantek craft

Peranakan culture is often synonymous with its eclectic cuisine. But what about its abundance

of cultural artefacts?

At the Babazaar, only the best stalls known for the high standard of their products were chosen to showcase their wares. *Kebayas*, sarongs, batik apparel and antique jewellery were brought in from all over the country and even from merchants from our neighbour up north, Malaysia.

For the *bibiks* it was an excellent opportunity to display their collection (in some cases, formidable collection) of authentic Peranakan prints and clothing. For the fashion conscious young adult, it was the time to purchase that *kebaya* to recreate a modern Peranakan-themed outfit.

Yet another attraction was a sale of heirloom-quality furniture and collectibles which elicited gasps of delight from many who viewed items such as an old gramophone (fully working), antique curio cabinets, assorted silverware, an *epergne* and a elaborately-carved mother-of-pearl dining table.



The crowds at the SMU Concourse.

That was exactly what the organisers of the Babazaar set out to achieve: to revive and recreate the vibrant scenes reminiscent of lavish Peranakan celebrations and to invite the public to join in this party spectacular.

Only the most sedap food

Of course, only the best food is befitting of such a grand occasion. With 30 vendors on hand to dish out the *crème-de-la crème* of the Peranakan food menu, guests were spoiled for choice with quality pickings which would satisfy even the most discerning *bibiks*.

With traditional favourites like *kueh chang*, *ayam buah keluak*,



Right: Peranakan-inspired art by young artist Herman Salleh.

Flea market and charity stalls

The Babazaar was not only about engaging the Peranakan community; it reached out to the youths, tourists and new Singaporeans. Apart from the food and craft stalls, there was a flea market section peddling all manner of exotic trinkets and goods from clothes to fashion accessories, and even plants, giving the Babazaar an avant-garde flavour. Eight stalls from various charitable organisations (including the Salvation Army, Girls' Brigade and MKAC) were also invited to set up booths to raise funds and awareness for worthy causes.

Learning how to masak

Another highlight of the festivities was the mouth-watering series of cooking demonstrations helmed by Chef Philip Chia and featuring special appearances by other guest chefs.

Perennial favourites such as *babi pongteh*, pineapple tarts, *buah keluak* and even modern interpretations such as Peranakan canapes and scones with wolfberries were prepared in front of the eager audience. These demonstrations left the audience clamouring to sample the food.

Worthy of a mention was the "battle of the *Buah Keluak*", a series of three different takes on the nut. Three chefs served up three different versions: the Nyonya type, the *Chetti* Peranakan variant and the Eurasian variety. The *Chetti* Peranakan *Keluak* packed a heavier chilli punch, and the Eurasian *Keluak* was similar to

the traditional Indian curry.

The biggest & BEST, indeed

With the crowd, the ceaseless music, and the continuous joget, the Babazaar was without a doubt the star event of the Peranakan Festival 2009. Be sure to watch for its return! ❖

To see more photos of the Peranakan event of the year please visit:
<http://peranakan.sg/2009/babazaar/>



Chef Philip Chia (middle) and his team creating *keluak* canapes.



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EVENTS

BUTTERFLIES AT THE BALL

The Peranakan Association marked its 109th anniversary with an evening of lushness



Right: An abundance of butterflies at each table.

Middle left: Our guests from Penang with Baba and Mrs Lee Kip Lee.

Middle right: Nyonyas Bebe Seet and Ong Poh Neo receive Mr and Mrs Tony Tan.



The Peranakan Ball 2009 saw a gathering of babas and nyonyas from around the region to celebrate the best of their eclectic culture. The Padang Ballroom at Swissotel, The Stamford, was filled with over 400 guests on 28 November. The evening's theme was Peranakan Butterflies, and the beautiful insect was abundantly spotted in prints, embroidery and beadwork on the many guests who donned their *sarong kebayas* and *baju lokchuan*.

As the host of this year's Baba Convention, Singapore welcomed fellow Peranakans from the region - Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Australia. The Baba Convention is hosted annually in rotation by the Peranakan Associations of Malacca, Penang and Singapore. We are looking forward to next year's Baba Convention, which will be held in Phuket.



Left: Nyonyas for the evening.

Right: Red proves a lucky colour for this prizewinner.





"We are very excited to host the Baba Convention this year, and it is our honour to be a part of the celebration of our culture and traditions with the community. This year's Peranakan Festival is our biggest to date. We hope that the Festival provides a platform for us to introduce and nurture young Peranakans and Singaporeans alike about the Peranakan culture and heritage which we hold dearly in our hearts," said Baba Lee Kip Lee, President of The Peranakan Association, Singapore.

The evening was one to remember as guests were entertained by local *acapella* group

Vocaluptuous and *lagu-lagu joget* by seven-piece band, Locomotion. The event, which was hosted by Baba Alvin Yapp, was filled with fun and laughter. Guests participated in a Peranakan trivia quiz and watched an interview with the cast of the play, *Bedrooms*. Dinner comprised a delectable menu of authentic Peranakan dishes including *ayam buah keluak*, *chap chai* and *bakwan kepiting*. ❖

To see more photos of the Peranakan gala of the year please visit: <http://peranakan.sg/2009/dnd/>

Left: Babas Chan Eng Thai and Peter Wee greet our guests from Phuket.

Middle: Baba Lee Kip Lee enjoys a round of chubitchubit semot with the ladies.

Right: Octogenarian Nyonya Annie Lim from Penang hips it up with Baba Chan Eng Thai.



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EVENTS

THE 22ND BABA CONVENTION

Baba Chan Eng Thai reports from Singapore

Left: Our President Lee Kip Lee exchanging gifts with Penang Peranakan Association President Dato Khoo Keat Siew.

Right: Padri Robert Wowor at a panel session moderated by Baba Ee Sin Soo.



Babas and nyonyas came from Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Phuket, Jakarta and even Melbourne, proud of the legacies they had inherited from their forefathers and eager to know more about their unique culture and heritage.

At the 22nd Baba Convention from 27 to 29 November 2009, they all came together, renewed old ties, made new ones and heard from a varied panel of presenters on the living legacies of the Peranakans in Manado, Sulawesi, Medan, Sumatra and the *Chetti Melaka* Indians of Singapore.

The delegates started arriving in Singapore on 25 November. Our goodwill ambassadors from The Peranakan Association welcomed them and ensured that the delegations' needs were attended to until the end of the Convention, which was held at Hotel Royal @ Queens.

Below: Delegates who visited the Baba House were treated to a special guided tour by Baba Peter Lee (second from left).



The first night was the *Malam Joget Ramay Ramay*. As the name *joget* suggested, the babas and nyonyas surely danced to the accompaniment of the resident band, Locomotion. The spread of *laok* from Guan Hoe Soon Restaurant and the performances from every contingent, including the Gunong Sayang Association, made the *Malam Joget* enjoyable for all.

The Convention ended with a most delightful performance of a medley of popular Malay songs by the Singapore Chinese Girls School (SCGS). As the SCGS was co-founded by the illustrious Babas Dr Lim Boon Keng and Sir Song Ong Siang, the presence of the SCGS choir was a fine example of a living Baba legacy.

The delegates were treated to a host of activities as part of the Peranakan Festival. Among them was a matinee performance of *Bedrooms* or *Bilek Roda Hidop* in Baba Malay, at the University Cultural Centre. It was very well received by the audience and even the Thai Peranakans from Phuket were not left out as English subtitles were provided. The Peranakan Ball rounded off a very busy day.

The last day of the Convention started early with a visit to the Peranakan Museum's *Baba Bling* Exhibition of exquisite nyonya jewellery. The exhibition was extended specially by the Museum for delegates of the Convention. Some of them also visited the Baba House at 157, Neil Road for a conducted tour by its Honorary Curator, our own Baba Peter Lee, whose knowledge and enthusiasm for Peranakan history made their time a most enriching experience.

The Presidents of the fraternal associations announced that the 23rd Baba Convention would be held in Phuket in 2010. The whole event made many babas and nyonyas realise that the Baba legacy is shared by fellow Peranakans in many communities in South East Asia. Theirs is not a fossilised legacy but a living one, as evident at this special annual gathering of the Peranakans. ❖

Hidop Budaya Baba!

Here is a *panton* specially composed by our First Vice President, Baba Peter Wee, and by the Chairman of the 22nd Baba Convention Committee, Mr Chan Eng Thai, to express the theme of the Convention and spirit of Baba culture:

Kain batik, tulis sulam,
Sulam tangan kebaya robia,
Pakaian Bibik pakaian Nyonya,
Baju China, Baju Baba,
Berlian di mulot hati sayang,
Bahasa Baba, Bahasa Nyonya,
Satu pata, seribu sayang,
Hidop Baba, Hidop Budaya!

The hand-painted batik cloth,
Hand-embroidered voile kebayas,
Adornments of bibiks and nyonyas.
The gem of love within,
The Peranakans' Baba Malay,
The words of love unfold,
Everlasting and living Baba culture!



Above: Young nyonyas from the SCGS choir (above).



A light moment with Bibik Hitam from Gunong Sayang.

Excerpts of a speech by Prof Tan Chorh Chuan, President, National University of Singapore, at the opening of the 22nd Baba Convention:

“The Peranakans have, through the years, made many important and prominent contributions to societies in the region – in politics and community leadership, arts and culture, language and dress, and of course, food and cuisine. Yours is a culture with a long history and deep roots, yet it has evolved and adapted to the rapid pace and changes of modern society, while staying true to its distinctive identity. Today the Peranakan culture is not just resilient – it is flourishing. And this is in no small part due to the efforts of those gathered here today.

The Peranakan Association of Singapore stands out as a model of how the many dimensions of your rich and distinctive culture are being shared and appreciated not just within your community but with a much wider audience. The Association is a venerable 109 years old this year. But I must say, it is growing ever more vibrant, and dynamic with age.



Prof Tan Chorh Chuan, Guest-of-Honour at the Convention.

My heartiest congratulations!

Indeed, we can draw valuable lessons from the enduring vibrancy and longevity of the Peranakan culture, despite - or perhaps, because of - the diversity that exists within the Peranakan community itself. Lessons that are very relevant to us today with the growing diversity of modern-day Singapore society.”

To see more photos of the convention please visit:
<http://peranakan.sg/2009/babaconvention/>

GUAN ANTIQUE

BIRTH OF THE NEWEST BABA BABY!

Baba Peter Lee witnesses the launch of the region's latest Peranakan Association

As a sure sign of the dynamism of the Peranakan heritage, the newest Peranakan Association was officially launched on 31 October 2009.

The *Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor* (PPBNKLS) commemorated this with an inaugural conference and opening ceremony at the main auditorium of the Muzium Negara, Kuala Lumpur, jointly organised by the Association, the Institute of Ethnic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), the Faculty of Social Sciences, UKM, and the National Museum of Kuala Lumpur. Formed on 28 July 2008 with 60 members, the Association spent a year preparing for the event. For the very first time in the century-long history of Peranakan associations, a nyonya has become a president! Associate Professor Dr Lee Su Kim, president of the new Association, is also professor at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics at UKM.

The theme of the conference was *Baba Nyonya: A Multicultural Living Legacy*. The opening address was given by Professor Datuk Dr Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, the Director of the Institute of Ethnic Studies, UKM. Following this was a lively keynote address by Dr Lee. Her paper was appropriately entitled *Twilight or High Noon? Peranakan Adaptability and Resilience in the 21st Century*.

The auditorium was packed to capacity with about 350 people, and according to Dr Lee, some



Pasang lilin at the opening ceremony with the representatives of all the regional associations and the Guest-of-Honour, Senator Heng Seau Kie.

people had to be turned down because there were no more seats, reflecting the great enthusiasm for this subject in Malaysia. The Association was officially launched by the Guest-of-Honour Senator Heng Seau Kie, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture, who, to everyone's delight, announced a disbursement of RM10,000 towards the Association's programmes. This was followed by a cultural presentation organised by committee member Baba Cedric Tan comprising a Baba Nyonya Wedding and a hilarious comedy skit performed by three young *anak wayang*, Aaron Loo and Simon Tan from Malacca and KT from Singapore. The day ended with a raucous *dondang sayang* and *joget* session. ❖

For more details of the conference and the association, please visit: <http://www.peranakan-kl.org/>

Bottom left: Conference panel with all the speakers together with moderator Assoc. Prof. Dr Ong Puay Liu (centre).

Bottom right: The three bibik impersonators: (from left) KT, Simon Tan and Aaron Loo.



EVENTS

A BABA WEDDING AT THE APEC SUMMIT

Baba Richard Tan reports from The Esplanade

The Main Wayang Company was honoured and excited to be able to present our Peranakan culture and heritage on an international level as Singapore played host to Leaders of 21 APEC economies and over 1,300 international delegates at the recent APEC Summit at the Esplanade.

It was a delightful evening on 14 November for the delegates and VIP guests to visit our elaborately decorated Peranakan Pavilion. On display were interactive handicrafts from a mini Peranakan jewellery exhibition,

kasot manek (beaded slippers), *bunga rampay* (potpourri) making demos; and even a hands-on experience to *ikat kueh chang* (wrap rice dumplings)

or have their photos taken with our Baba Wedding entourage while savouring *kueh tair* (pineapple tarts).

A specially commissioned, stylised Baba Wedding was the highlight of the evening as we showcased the various rites and rituals in 12 entertaining minutes (as compared to a traditional Baba wedding that took 12 days) at two different show locations. It began with the *Penganteng* (bride) being introduced on stage while the *Kiah-Sai* (bridegroom) and his entourage simultaneously started with a rousing *Berarak* (procession), complete with *lap chai* (gifts borne by nyonyas), wedding lanterns, *chaiki* (red banners), *seroni* musicians and percussionists, creating a festive mood on the Esplanade grounds, arriving in grand style at the amphitheatre stage.

Our *Sangkek Um* entertained with her humorous *bibik* antics in this seamless wedding ceremony that culminated in a finale with everyone being invited to join in a *Joget* Celebration dance! ❖



The Baba Wedding was the evening's highlight.



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The Main Wayang Company Pte Ltd

www.mainwayang.com peranakan@mainwayang.com +65-6384 3181

EVENTS

A NOBEL EVENING

Right: The lavish table setting.

Below: Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka with Nyonya Elizabeth Lee who prepared the dinner.



For the Singapore Sun Festival 2009, the NUS Centre For the Arts (CFA) organised an exclusive charity dinner at the Baba House on 2 October 2009. The function was graced by 23 donors and a sum of \$33,200 was raised for the conservation and promotion of Peranakan culture. Donors dined with Nigerian Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, the author and playwright behind notable works like *The Interpreters* (1965), *Season of Anomy* (1973), and plays such as *Death and The King's Horseman* (1975) and *The Swamp Dwellers* (1963).

The 10-course dinner was lovingly prepared by Peranakan matriarch and culinary artist Mrs Elizabeth Lee and PeraMakan, a family-run Peranakan restaurant. ❖



A CHORUS LINE DOWN UNDER

Nyonya Ivy Lee-Chan Gek Kim hails the choir that braved sun, wind and rain

Choir members of the Peranakan Association Australia Inc soldiered on against the elements to present a medley of favourites that left the audience asking for more!

Yes, on 27 September, seventeen of us went onstage at Southbank in the heart of Melbourne, braving 11°C cold and gusty winds to perform at *Fiesta*



The Peranakan choir from Melbourne.

Malaysia. We were a colourful troupe; the ladies decked in bright *sarong kebaya* on the front line of the open-air stage and the men in *batik* behind, happily shielded by their fairer counterparts. We sang our hearts out, swaying to the rhythm of numbers like *Oleh, Oleh Bandung*, *Rasa Sayang Eh*, *Chek Chek Semot* and *Geylang Si Paku Geylang*.

The sun made its appearance at the start, if only

briefly. Halfway through our 15-minute gig, it began to drizzle. Then the wind sprayed icy-cold drops on our faces. Spectators took cover at the shelter nearby, cheering us on, applauding our spirit to go on with the show, against all odds.

Nyonyas Yan and Ivy took centrestage to *joget* (dance) to *Nonya Pakai Bunga*. Next was a *ronggeng* to *Rasa Sayang Eh* by Nyonya Pauline and Baba Reggie. The audience was called to join in and they certainly did, to everyone's delight. "Encore, encore!" the audience clamoured. The choir obliged and closed with *Geylang Si Paku Geylang* amidst more shouts of "Encore!" But alas good things must come to an end!

We performed again on 4 October at the ACMI at Federation Square, on the opening night of the annual Australian-Malaysian Film Festival. This was our third consecutive year at the event. Happily, it was indoors this time. The audience gamely joined in to *joget* to our rendition of *Rasa Sayang Eh*.

Our performance was well covered by the media and aired on TV3 (of Malaysia). *The New Straits Times* interviewed our Association President Alfred Chi and took photographs of the choir in action. We felt like overnight celebrities! ❖

NOTICEBOARD

NEW MEMBERS

A very warm welcome to our new members:

Mr Beng Stephen
Mdm Stella Chng Lee Huang
Miss Choo Puay Huang
Mdm Sophia Kan
Mr Vincent Khoo Teng Lau
Ms Fiona Koh
Mr Kunchi Johnny Ganesan
Mr Paul Ong Boon Shui
Ms Daisy Png
Mrs Wiwi Rasamala
Mr Benjamin Sek Yang Lim
Mrs Sianto Anna Sri Dewi
Mrs Vertue Annie Tay Chwee Lan
Miss Stella Clare Wee May Hua
Mdm Wijaya Vera Irwanto
Ms Yeow Ju Li

*If you would like to join us as a life member,
please download an application form from
peranakan.org.sg/members.*

OBITUARY

We extend condolences to the
family of Mr Chan U Seek.

NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2010

We warmly invite all members
of The Peranakan Association
Singapore to our 110th Annual
General Meeting.

Date: 27 March 2010

Time: 2.30 pm

Venue: SEAMEO Regional
Language Centre (RELC)
30 Orange Grove Road
Singapore 258352

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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.

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 siren 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>*

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, siren 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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