



# the peranakan

ISSUE 3 • 2010



## MATERNAL MAGNIFICENCE

A mother lode of reflections on the first ladies of our lives

AH SUMS  
*in Sum*

Dalam Dapor  
gets SAUCY!

Baba Goh Keng Swee  
*Remembered*

Martha Stewart  
at the Baba House





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The acrylic paintings on the cover, *Her First Kebaya*, and on the editorial page, *Windy By the Sea*, are by Baba artist Desmond Sim.



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SINGAPORE

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# OH MOTHER!

What is the Peranakan community's stereotype of a 'good mother'? One who is ever self-sacrificing, the dutiful wife, the ultimate homemaker. Is she possible today?

Some may say the answer is obvious in this career-minded day and age, but I will leave you to make your own conclusion. I know my mother measured close to perfection as the *nyonya* mother, with her ability to cook, sew and singlehandedly look after her little brood of three while my father went out to work. But what were the other aspects of traditional motherhood less spoken about? One which particularly affected me was the way the boys were traditionally doted upon while the girls had to be domestically trained. And because of this, I found it hard to appreciate my mother's qualities when I was growing up. "*Mari tolong*" ("Come help") was the dreaded call after school or at weekends. As her only daughter, I felt victimised and trapped when I was compelled to help in the kitchen or do the housework while my two brothers went out to play.

Reflecting on those years since, I have much to thank her for. Once past my unwilling apprenticeship, I learned how to prepare and cook meats and vegetables, fry *rempah* till it came up fragrant and not burnt, fry shallots (*bawang goreng*) to golden perfection, and use the *agak-agak* (estimation) method of cooking and tasting till the dish came up right. Even though we had maids, I also had to make the beds, sweep the floor and fold the clothes. It was a training that more than equipped me when I got married and moved out. My *nyonya* cousins, all working mothers,

were similarly trained by their mothers.

Each of us has our own personal story to tell of our mothers. In the following pages we celebrate this special maternal bond as 3 of our writers share their fond experiences and I, of my mother who crossed the golden age of 80

last June. We also feature a mother figure to many *babas* and *nyonyas*: the *majie* or black-and-white *amah*, now gone the way of the dodo along with the *chongpoh* (Hainanese cook) - two key figures in many well-to-do Peranakan households. Also in this issue is a black ingredient that we cannot do without in Peranakan cooking - the basic black soya sauce or *tauyu* that can elevate the most simple dishes to heavenly satisfaction.

We celebrate a *bagus* (wonderful) piece of news - collaboration between The Peranakan Association Singapore and the Joo Chiat Community Club to build the Katong and Joo Chiat suburbs into a recognised cultural hub for all things Peranakan. More too, on how our culture is gaining global exposure with new audiences. This issue also pays tribute to two Peranakan personalities who passed on this year.

Sign up for the annual Baba Convention, which will be held in Phuket from 20 to 22 November. I am told the convention promises to be a grand affair. *Sawasdee kaa*, come join us!

LINDA



## LETTERS

A little comment re the debate over whether *ketumbar* is used in making *Babi Pongteh*. My mother always used *ketumbar* for her *Babi Pongteh*. She dry-roasted (no oil) the coriander seeds in a *kwali* then giling the ingredient on a *batu giling* (stone grinder) to release more fragrance before mixing into a paste with some water. She slow-cooked her *Babi Pongteh* in a *belanga* (clay pot) over her charcoal stove to gradually release the flavours and then for the meat to simply fall off the bone!!

Josephine Chia  
England

With reference to the article, "Aspects of Respect" by Lau Chwee Kim and Aileen Lau Guek Lin (issue 2 of 2010), I would like to introduce the terms *tulang* (bone) and *kulit* (skin).

In the old days, these terms were commonly used by the Peranakans to describe the paternal or maternal relationship, usually of grandparents and grandchildren. For example, if one says that his *chuchu tulang* has gone abroad for studies, he is referring to his paternal grandchild. Likewise, *chuchu kulit* refers to the maternal grandchildren.

Contrary to the article, *mama-cho* is hardly used by the Peranakans. Instead, *ma-cho* or *mak-cho* are more popularly used to address one's great grandmother. *Ma-cho kulit* also refers to the maternal great grandmother.  
Norman Cho  
Singapore



# CHAP-JI-KI and MY MOTHER

*Chap-ji-ki* gambling was more than a pastime common in Singapore's early days. For some nyonyas, it was an obsession that sometimes bordered on the unusual, as Baba William Gwee Thian Hock recalls in this 2-part feature

The typical Singapore nyonya of one to two generations ago was a full-time homemaker who toiled at home for her family. The privileged had domestic help to shoulder part of the household chores but, in most instances, they tackled the work singlehandedly. Before the advent of time-saving electrical appliances and gadgets, the nyonya still managed to find time for marketing, laundry, ironing, sewing and keeping the home clean besides cooking and serving her husband's and the usually large number of children's other needs. She also found time to unwind with her favourite pastime of punting on the popular *chap-ji-ki* lottery.

*Chap-ji-ki* involves 12 numbers from 1 to 12. A punter bets on two numbers written on a betting slip, either side by side or one above the other. The sum wagered is noted by the side of each number. For example, when 5 and 4 are wagered, the punter wins when 5 and 4 are drawn in sequence but not 4 followed by 5. To ensure that both combinations are covered, that is, 5/4 as well as 4/5, the punter must cross an X on the betting slip. But the snag is he gets only half the winning prize, ie \$50 instead of \$100.

## *Chap-ji-ki* syndicates

Although illegal, *chap-ji-ki* was very popular. It was the poor man's indulgence because bets as low as 10 cents could win 10 times the sum wagered. In my young days, two major clandestine syndicates

ran the lottery island-wide in Singapore. They operated two sessions daily, in the morning and evening. Bets for the morning draw had to be handed in by noon and the results would be out by 10am the next day. Bets for the evening draw were handed in by 6pm and the results announced by 5pm the day after. The evening bets offered an incentive discount of 30 percent.

Other syndicates were less popular because they were rumoured to be financially less sound. They had names such as *Tua Por* (Big Town), *Sio Por* (Small Town), *Tau Kua* (soya bean cake) and *Paya Lebar*. On rare occasions, the Law would descend on a syndicate and arrest the kingpin. Syndicate operations would be suspended for a mere two to three days before resuming under a new kingpin.

A system of runners comprising individuals and shopkeepers were either employed or freelanced to collect the betting slips. In the multiple rungs of the *chap-ji-ki* organisational hierarchy, the slips were

passed up the rung before eventually ending in the hands of the kingpin or teams behind the racket. These kingpins financed and organized the network; their identities were not disclosed even to the runners.

It was no secret that some runners retained a portion of the betting slips with the cash they collected by hand from punters or were passed on to them by lower-level runners. They naturally profited when none of the slips struck gold but had to be prepared to pay out of their own pockets when the slips bore winning numbers. Babas and nyonyas



*A young William Gwee at home with his mother.*





Mr and Mrs William Gwee and mother in later years.

former home on Carpmael Road from it. He never ran the risk of arrest although he ran his 'business' openly. Some police regularly visited him to have their palms greased in return for freedom from official molestation. With corruption rife in Singapore's early years, this win-win situation was a lesson I learned early in life. lottery. Punters never received the full prize money because runners imposed a 5 percent commission on their winnings. At times, when a runner had *makan* too many heavily-betted slips that won and he was not prepared to pay up, he would just tell the punters the police had raided the syndicate, which meant all bets were null and void and there would be no refund. Swindled punters had no choice but to accept it as gospel truth. No punter dared to make a police report because the lottery was illegal. Punters were also denied transparency on how the winning numbers were drawn. In truth, the numbers were never drawn. The syndicate merely announced as winners the pair of numbers that were least betted, minimizing the winnings that had to be paid out. But these proved to be no deterrent to punters.

### Mother and grandmother the punters

Both my mother and paternal grandmother indulged in this illegal lottery, whatever its defects. Each morning before World War II, when the neighbourhood runner came to collect their betting slips, my duty was to hand him the slips because it was considered unladylike for nyonyas of good standing to associate publicly with young men outside the family. He was a Eurasian in his 30s who lived down the road; tallish, somewhat underweight and hunched which earned him the

call such people the ones who '*makan*' (to eat, consume) the bets.

Obviously, to *makan* bets was extremely lucrative because a neighbour who lived several doors diagonally opposite our became wealthy

nickname of '*Bongkok Udang*' (prawn-like hunchback). Trust the Baba community, especially their womenfolk, to seize every excuse to create nicknames!

I had the boyish pleasure of stealing a glance at grandmother's betting slip. For reasons best known to her, she preferred to write her bets either in the Chinese numerals but mostly in the unique *chap-ji-ki* dotted symbols instead of the usual numerals 1 to 12. I often played a mental betting game to guess which type of numerals and symbols they favoured each day. Mother usually employed the normal numerals, perhaps as a silent indication she was modern in her ways.

### NUMERALS AND SYMBOLS IN CHAP-JI-KI

Normal numerals:	1	2	3	4	5
Chinese numerals:	一	二	三	四	五
Chap-ji-ki symbols:	•	••	•••	••••	•••••
Normal numerals:	6	7	8	9	10
Chinese numerals:	六	七	八	九	十
Chap-ji-ki symbols:	•••••	•••••	•••••	•••••	•••••
Normal numerals:	11	12			
Chinese numerals:	十一	十二			
Chap-ji-ki symbols:	••••••	••••••			

Grandmother always had a problem with the symbol for number 10. Her version differed from day to day. Her bets were always written in the bizarre symbols of circles and crosses, most probably only understood by those involved in the lottery then. Since neither grandmother nor mother bet beyond 30 cents on a pair of numbers, I was only familiar up to the 30 cents symbol. Mother in later years revealed to me the rest as shown below:

#	0	#0	00	000	0000	Ø	Ø0
5c	10c	15c	20c	30c	40c	50c	60c
Ø00	Ø000	Ø0000	•	••	•••	••••	•••••
70c	80c	90c	\$1	\$2	\$5	\$10	

While grandmother indulged openly in *chap-ji-ki*, mother did so surreptitiously. Like many Babas then who were not in the high income bracket, father could ill afford the luxury of a wife who indulged in even social gambling. He forbade her from this pastime. But with grandmother, father being the true-blue filial Baba son, never raised any objection. Even if she had incurred debts, father would have made good her losses in dutiful silence. Years later, I was to have the honour of covering mother's occasional financial problems from *chap-ji-ki* losses with pride in living up to my



father's oft-repeated adage: "One can have but one mother in this world...."

After grandmother passed away, mother was the only gambler in the household. By then, the Eurasian runner had moved out of our neighbourhood, compelling mother to deposit her betting slips with Ah Guan, the wealthy runner who lived a few doors away. It was a safer bet because Ah Guan was deemed to have police protection.

### Gaming code

As *chap-ji-ki* was illegal in the country and unofficially illegal in our home, I was amused to observe how mother concealed her daily lottery habit when father was not at work. She turned to the Chinese grocer at Crane Road for the daily *chap-ji-ki* results and normally bet in the evening draw to enjoy the discount. Resorting to code speak with the grocer, she would cup the mouthpiece and whisper for the time. In her excitement at hearing the "coded" results, she would loudly repeat the number even when father was within earshot. Little did she realise how ridiculous it was when clocks were working accurately all over our home. Plus, it was most out of the ordinary for a grocer to provide

a time service.

Responding, the grocer might say *gor tiam san eh ji* (five fifteen), being the code for 5 and 3. Mother would repeat it aloud as 5.15 pm or am when it was about 10 in the morning! I had a nagging suspicion that father knew but decided not to curb her small-scale gambling any more. He was most probably amused at her futile attempts to pull wool over his eyes.

Using code to get the draw result was a common practice. Even the public bus driver would suddenly stop his vehicle in front of a coffee shop to hand-signal for the result. Sometimes he would boldly shout to enquire. Or leave the engine running and the passengers waiting as he nonchalantly alighted, strolled into the coffee shop, placed his bets or collected his winnings before continuing to drive to the next destination. In the days when Singaporeans were more patient, none of the waiting and sweating passengers in the non-air conditioned bus ever protested or complained. Perhaps most of them were punters themselves or life was less stressful then and nobody was in any particular hurry.

In the next issue: Variations on an obsession \*

*"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also..."*

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# BALEK KAMPONG

England-based Nyonya Josephine Chia revisits the delicious days of her childhood in Potong Pasir with *Mak*

Most Peranakans love to talk about food, eat or cook it. I'm certainly no exception! It is interesting how the memory or smell of a particular dish can evoke a strong response. I'm amazed at how the aroma of food can pull me back into my childhood in *Kampong (village) Potong Pasir*.

Even though it might be snowing heavily outside my window and I'm tucked warm under a goose-down duvet, I can be propelled back into my family's attap hut in 1950s Singapore. Occasionally, upon waking up in England, I still experience a feeling of sadness at the lack of cooking smells that would suggest the presence of family.

What a delight it was to be awakened by the delicious fragrance of coconut milk boiling with the rice to be made into *nasi lemak*, my mother's specialty.

Memories of food and my childhood are invariably linked with intimate memories of *Mak* who wore the *sarong kebaya* all her life.

If we were lucky, we would get to eat the *nasi lemak*. Mostly, *Mak* would put the coconut rice on banana leaves, add *sambal*, *ikan bilis* and wrap them into green pyramids. Then they went into a rattan basket and my eldest brother was the first in the family to cart them round the kampong calling out, "*Nasi Lemak! Nasi Lemak! Lima Sen! Coconut Rice! Coconut Rice! Five cents!*" The kampong was predominantly Malay

which suited us Peranakans since we spoke more Malay than Chinese.

Like many nyonias of old, my mother was a skilled seamstress and an excellent cook. Once, she had servants to order about in the kitchen in my grandparents' magnificent house in Malacca: "*Chop this! Giling that! Tumbok belachan.*" However, subsequently the family fell on bad times and she ended up in the shanty village of Potong Pasir with my father.



*Kampong Potong Pasir – woman carrying water by attap huts and vegetable plots.*



*Boxing Day, 1954 at rich aunt's home. Mak carrying brother Robert. Josephine looking miserable with hot iron permed hair!*

"Whatever your circumstances, always live with joy," *Mak* used to say. Her sayings intrigued me. She was uneducated. Where was the wisdom coming from?

Our kampong was just off Upper Serangoon Road, walking distance from the fabled Alkaff Gardens which were developed by Shaik Alkaff of the Alkaff family. The gardens were styled in the manner of a Japanese tea garden with a restaurant, tea kiosks and artificial lake to emulate old Japan. It even had a small hillock that represented Mount Fuji! It was a popular recreational place and was so splendid that many of the Shaw Brothers' films were shot there, Singapore's first home grown films with our own actors. The most well-known and talented of them all was the dashing Malay actor, musician and director, P. Ramlee. He was handsome, had a pencil-thin moustache and a charismatic smile.

"P. Ramlee *datang* (is here)! P. Ramlee *datang*!" fans shouted. They would flock to the first air-conditioned cinema, The Alhambra at Beach Road, to see his films.

Singapore was largely rural in the 1950s. Orchard Road was still an expanse of nutmeg trees and palms. Coconut trees abounded. Usually, small-built Malay men would pick the coconuts. They shimmied up the trees like monkeys, their bare hands and feet gripping the trunk.

My mother would usually find a fallen coconut for her *nasi lemak*. It was a laborious task to squeeze milk from the coconut. But the result was worth every effort. I can still recall the taste of her special coconut rice.

The Kallang River cut a broad swathe across



Kampong Potong Pasir. This river was both the boon and bane of the village. In the days when there was no piped water, it was a crucial source of drinking water. Vegetable farms lined the banks of the river, farmed by Chinese farmers supplying fresh *chye sim*, *kai lan*, *ubi kayu* and even *padi* to markets around the island.

I still remember fooling around with the neighbourhood kids in our bare feet on the mud bunds that surrounded the *padi* fields. It was simply a delightful experience to squelch our toes into the cool mud. My mother was an expert on the Singer sewing machine. During Chinese New Year, she would pedal it furiously. Like all Peranakans, she was *pantang* (superstitious), and insisted on new curtains for the house and new clothes for us to bring in good luck and prosperity. Unable to afford fabric from the major stores like

Robinsons, Metro or stores on the High Street, she would buy them from peddlers at Robinson *Petang*, the Thieves Market at Sungei Road. It was luck whether we got fabric that would be the same shade the whole way through! When times were really bad and she could not afford to buy any new clothes for us, she would recycle the previous year's curtains to sew them into shirts and dresses. At least the clothes were considered new!

"So clever, your mother!" neighbours said when they saw all of our eight brothers and sisters wearing clothes in the same patterned material.

Two large ponds used for fish farming were also located in the village. These and the river over flowed when ever the monsoon storms hit the village. The heavy rain dug pot-holes onto the village sandy road. Drainage was generally poor on the whole island in the 50s. Our village was inundated several times in its history. Major floods claimed lives and took Potong Pasir into the media lime-light in 1953 and 1967. I can never forget those days, seeing the water level rise and seeping into our houses, first a trickle then a torrent that swept away furniture and precious belongings. The surreal sight of a bulky, wooden Chinese coffin floating past me is a memory I could never forget! Was there a corpse inside? I was too terrified to ask.

I was born in 1951 so spent most of my childhood and teenage years in Kampong Potong Pasir. Lighting was provided by carbide and hurricane lamps and later a generator supplied intermittent electricity. It was pot-luck when the generator worked.

My mother's earnings from *nasi lemak* and her skill

in making *nyonya kueh* rescued me from a life of ignorance. Without the money and her tremendous effort to defy my father and get me to school, I might be someone's maid or running a *nasi lemak* stall all my life instead of writing these English words. My moment of epiphany came when I saw a MILO tin when I was eight. It suddenly hit me that I could not

understand the squiggles on the tin.

"Mak, I want to go to school," I said.

"You know that your father won't allow it or pay for it."

"But I want to study, learn English."

"How badly do you want to go to school?"

"I really, really want to."

"Are you prepared to work for it?"

"Yes, I will do any work you give me."

I was her first living daughter. There were

*Mak is skilled at her SINGER sewing machine. Brothers and sisters in clothes of the same fabric. Josephine, the eldest daughter, is the second from the left.*



others before me who had died due to the lack of food and health-care. She had so many children, she lost count.

"It would be good if you don't have to depend on a man for your living. I've to put up with a lot. You need not go through that. I'll take in the neighbours' washing and you can help me wash the clothes, bring the water up from the well. I will make more *nyonya kueh* and *nasi lemak* and you can go round the village selling them."

And so I followed in my brother's footsteps and hawked the *nasi lemak* around the kampong.

"*Nasi Lemak! Nasi Lemak! Sepuloh Sen! Coconut Rice!*" By that time, the price had risen to 10 cents per packet.

Fortunately, as my sisters are younger, they did not face the same battle and were allowed to go to school. From that poverty, our phoenix rose. Today, all my brothers and sisters are very successful in business, living in landed properties. I'm the only non-business person preferring to be a writer. I'm not earning a lot but it feels good to be living my dream. And I have my mother to thank.

Kampong Potong Pasir was razed to the ground in the early 1970s. So I cannot *balek kampong* (return home) to my village anymore, at least not in a physical sense. But I can always return to it in my memory. \*



*Mak at 84.*



# REMEMBERING OUR NYONYA MOTHERS

Baba Norman Cho recalls the women in his family

My impression of my mother, Hong Kim Lian, is that of a modern nyonya. A teenager of the 1960s, the only type of *kebaya* that she ever wore was the Indonesian lace *kebaya* popularized by the singer, Aneke Gronloh. It required no *kerosang*. It was only fairly recently that she started wearing the traditional *sarong kebaya* on festive occasions. Although she cooks well, she does not believe in spending hours with the mortar and pestle to produce the *rempah* (spice paste). Still, she never fails to dish out sumptuous Peranakan food using her trusted electric grinder.

Her mother, Yeo Bee Teck, was hurried into marriage in 1942 at the age of 15, to protect her from the invading Japanese. She neither cooked nor sewed nor wore the *nyonya kebaya*. She was always attired in either the *cheongsam* or western dress, and like my mother, donned the Indonesian lace *kebaya* in the 1960s when it was fashionable. I remember her being a strict disciplinarian. Her mother, Tan Imm Neo, took care of the household chores and looked after my mother and her siblings. It was from her that my mother picked up cooking

Left: My mother  
Estelle Hong  
Kim Lian with  
her husband  
Charles Cho.

Maternal  
grandmother Yeo  
Bee Teck was  
a strict  
disciplinarian  
who never wore  
a *kebaya*.  
Norman Cho is  
the cute toddler  
in the pram.



skills. Imm Neo was typical of the nyonya of her age and time. She wore the *kebaya* throughout her life. She tirelessly devoted her entire life to caring for her family and tending to the family altar.

My paternal grandmother, Yeo Koon Neo was a great influence in my life. She doted on me since I was a little child. Understandable, as I am the first grandson. She was instrumental in imparting Peranakan traditions to me. We conversed in Baba Malay, and I am indebted to her for my exceptional ability to speak the language. She was a well-





Left: Great grandmother Tan Chwee Neo was a great cook and fanatical cherki player.

Right: Paternal grandmother Yeo Koon Neo was a refined nyonya with impeccable dress sense.

*tiga-batang* (chignon) with a *bunga raya* (hibiscus). She explained to Koon Neo that the *bunga raya* would keep her *kaya-raya* (wealthy). She would have been born around the 1840s. She once related to Koon Neo a story about her own grandmother, that is, Koon Neo's great-grandmother. When she was 60 years old, this legendary nyonya apparently had an encounter with a crocodile. The petite granny had the habit of taking evening strolls by the nearby river to enjoy the breeze. One day, she mistook a crocodile for a log and sat on it! Her grandchild was shocked to witness this and beckoned the old lady towards her. This may well have been a true account since lighting was poor and much of Singapore was swampland during the early 1800s. Early Peranakans were also known to have set up business dwellings around the Singapore River at that time.

I have been able to



organised person, known for her prim and proper nature and her impeccable dress sense. Her mother, *baju-panjang* clad Tan Chwee Neo, was an avid cook who was known to single-handedly prepare 12 types of nyonya dishes faithfully each Chinese New Year. She was also gifted at cake-making and was known for her *kueh dadu* (pepper cakes). She was also a fanatical *cherki* (a nyonya card game) player. Great-grandfather had to lock her out for returning home too late. Her obsession for the game cost her her life when the taxi that she was in crashed en route to Johor for a *cherki* game.

Koon Neo never met her paternal grandmother who lived in Riau. However, she vividly remembered her maternal grandmother. She called her Mama *Taik Lalat* (grandmother with the mole) for she had a large mole on her cheek, and never knew her actual name. Mama *Taik Lalat* had a peculiar habit of adorning the top of her *sanggol*

trace the existence of my earliest nyonya ancestors to around the founding of Singapore. Sadly, no names were remembered even as accounts of their lives were being retold. Soon these accounts may also be lost since I am the only person in the family who can retell the tales from my grandmother. If you have a grandmother right now, do sit with her and ask her to share stories of her mother, grandmother and more. \*

*Do you have your own family story to tell? Write to us at [peranakan.org.sg](http://peranakan.org.sg).*





# 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**





# MAMA SAYANG

Nyonya Linda Chee celebrates a mother most loved

**C**HIOM, *chiom, lagi chiom* (kiss, kiss, and kiss again!), urged the crowd. My 83-year old father Louis Tan obligingly leaned over to give loving pecks to my mother Low Suan Neo at her 80th birthday dinner last June.

The overt display of affection contrasted with their days of chaperoned courtship, when Mummy was accompanied by her *Tachi* (elder sister) Lian on their dates to the movies or under the coconut trees. Theirs was a match-made marriage although they had played together as children and already knew who each other was. Among Malacca's Peranakan families, this was not unusual as almost everybody knew everybody in the community.

Daddy recalled the early post-war years after their marriage was solemnised on 2 November 1951 Malacca: "One week after our marriage, Suan Neo had to follow me back to Singapore and stayed in the rubber plantation on Island Club Road where I worked, with no electricity, water, gas or modern sanitation, and using only well water and oil lamps. She asked: 'Is this our honeymoon in the woods?' She had no complaints and brought up our three children through thick and thin, even when I had to go to another rubber estate in Johore three or four days a week."

Hardly the domineering matriarch, Mummy complements Daddy so well with their different personalities. She is the water to his fire, the wind to his sun. Growing up, we were terrified of his short temper and ran to our sea of calm whenever we were in a hot spot with our father. She never had to shout to discipline her children; all it took was cold war, her silence was deafening enough to make us wither and acquiesce.

As a child, I admired her *sulam* (embroidery) skills on the trusty Singer machine as she ran the needle swiftly and accurately over the tracing of flowers and leaves within the hoop of coloured robiah material. I have kept all her test swatches of embroidery as my precious heritage. It was in the kitchen that I took delight and spent the most time with her. Although her education up to Primary 3 was disrupted by the War, she could read and clipped recipes from *Her World* and the newspapers. It is a habit that I picked up,

compiling my own mountain of recipes and also recording her famed dishes such as *popiah kulit telur*, *itek tim* and *ikan masak asam*.

In her quiet way she gave me an education in the heritage she grew up with, through example. As a young girl I resented being the only sibling to help with all the housework, but now on the cusp of retirement after a busy career, I treasure what I have learnt from her above all else.

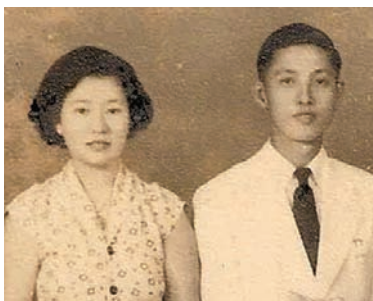
My two children, Olivia and Keith, are spending more time with their Mama and Kong-kong whenever they are back in Singapore from university studies in Australia. It is a lovely time for bonding as they practise cooking *babi pong teh* and *ayam tauyu* at their grandparents' home.

It often amazes me how differently my mother, I and my daughter have grown up. What part of my Peranakan heritage I can pass on to my daughter, who has grown up with none of the social handicaps of my mother's generation? What have we gained, what have we lost?

Mummy's gentle, nurturing and *alus* (refined) ways have paid back in the ready affection showered on her by family and friends alike. The homecoming was apparent as we surprised her with the celebration dinner, drawing relatives from Malacca, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Phuket and Melbourne. Perhaps the key to keeping our family together as well as our heritage and family history alive, is not some cultural Peranakan trait, but something more universal and magical: her unconditional and generous capacity to love. ✽



The loving couple, Louis and Suan Neo, at her 80th birthday celebration (above) and in their early years of marriage in the 1950s (centre).



Peranakan relatives at the birthday soiree: surnames Tan, Chee, Low, Yeo, Seet, Ho, Toh and more.





# REMEMBERING THE AH SUMS

Baba William Gwee Thian Hock sums up his family's experience with the 'black-and-white' helpers of old

A newspaper article, 'Majie recalls life with the Lees', in the *Sunday Times* (1 February, 2009) brings back memories of my childhood when many Baba households would have one or more of such *majies* tending house. The *Majie* is the Mandarin version of the Cantonese term 'ah mah cheh', which refers to unmarried domestic helpers from Guangdong province prevalent from the late 19th century to late 20th century. Babas called this ever-dependable domestic helper the 'Ah Sum', a term of Cantonese origin. Over the years, my family has benefited from the care of three *Ah Sums*.

A few months after I was born in the early 1930s, my mother decided to employ an *Ah Sum* to be my nanny. Besides this, the *Ah Sum* was expected to perform other household chores. At that time, our extended family home comprised my parents, my two elder sisters, my widowed maternal

grandmother, my father's younger brother, his wife and three sons, my father's youngest brother and his wife and my father's youngest unmarried sister. Father was the household head.

I have no recollection of this first *Ah Sum*, but according to mother, she had previously been employed by a neighbour. Her service had been terminated because of her crusty temperament. Indeed, mother soon experienced the new *Ah Sum*'s stubbornness firsthand, but tolerated her because she was an

experienced and independent worker who could speak Baba Malay, which proved beneficial for a non Chinese-speaking Baba home like ours. Moreover, trouble-free domestic help is a rarity, as all employers to this day will attest.

Unlike other *Ah Sums* who were known as the 'white and black' due to the white cotton jacket and black pair of pants they wore, our *Ah Sum* wore



Right: William Gwee's wife, Rosie Tan Chwee Neo as a baby girl in the arms of her Ah Sum, with her mother and siblings in Malacca.



Baba William Gwee as a toddler, in the arms of majie Ah Lin at 27 Cuppage Road, 1935. In front of him are his two sisters flanked by their male cousins.

a black jacket. Younger *Ah Sums* usually braided their hair or put them in pigtails but our middle-aged *Ah Sum* fashioned hers into a small bun. We never discovered her actual name. She was Ah Lin to us. The two subsequent *Ah Sums* who worked in our home also had monikers beginning with an 'Ah'. Their actual names remained unknown.

## Mungka Merah

We nicknamed Ah Lin *Mungka Merah* (red face) because of her reddish complexion which resulted from consuming the rice wine she made herself by fermenting glutinous rice. It was deemed a sign of good health to possess such a complexion.

In 1939 when the family moved out of Cuppage Road to live in Geylang, Ah Lin decided to tender her resignation. By then, I was five and did not require a nanny. Mother suspected Ah Lin's decision to quit was due to the fact that she was expecting another child. Ah Lin probably preferred household duties to baby-sitting.

Our new home was a rented apartment above a



coffee shop at the corner of Lorong 30 and Geylang Road. It was cramped but the rent was low and our stay was to be a short one as father was looking to purchase a house in the Joo Chiat–Katong neighbourhood. A year later in mid-1940, father bought a huge raised wooden bungalow house with attap roofing in Carpmael Road off Joo Chiat Road. It became apparent to mother that she needed a domestic helper to cope with managing a home of this size.

About a month after we had settled into our new home, mother heard of a young but inexperienced *Ah Sum* with minimal fluency in Baba Malay who was seeking employment. Mother opined that an inexperienced maid would not demand a high salary and could be taught easily; Baba Malay could also be picked up. Thus, Ah Chin came into our employment. She was a contrast to Ah Lin. She was in her 20s, wore her hair in a long pigtail and was dressed in the traditional white jacket and black pants. Ah Chin had the freshness of youth.

Ah Chin turned out to be an eager and fast learner. She also came to understand Baba Malay swiftly. She was a good worker, but tended to cry whenever her shortcomings were pointed out, even when this was done tactfully. She would then sulk for some hours. Mother accepted this as a tolerable idiosyncrasy.

## World War II

Singapore's experience of World War II began at dawn on 8 December 1941 with a Japanese air raid. During another such raid, a nearby house received a direct hit from a bomb. The blast severely damaged our home. After the all-clear siren was sounded, father enquired if everybody was all right. No one was injured except for Ah Chin who was bleeding from a wound at the back of her left shoulder blade. Father accompanied her in a rickshaw to the nearest First Aid station at Tanjong Katong School. When they returned several hours later, we learned that a piece of shrapnel the size of a 20-cent coin had lodged in her shoulder blade. Ah Chin was unable to sleep that night and groaned in pain. For the next few days mother forbade her from performing any household chores and insisted that she recuperate in bed.

As soon as Ah Chin felt a little better she sought permission to continue her recuperation at her *kuli fong* (a Cantonese term, literally 'coolie room',

referring to a room or flat rented by a group of workers or *Ah Sums*, for use during days-off or periods between jobs) in Chinatown. She assured mother she would be back as soon as the wound had healed, but she did not keep her promise. All later attempts to contact her drew a blank. We never discovered her reason for not wanting to continue her services with us. Mother speculated that Ah Chin might have deemed our home unlucky as she had been injured in the raid and had decided not to return lest another calamity befell her.

Singapore fell to the Japanese on 15 February 1942. A few months after normalcy was restored, a third *Ah Sum* came into our employment. Although Ah Choon was about Ah Lin's age, she had a smooth

complexion. She was tall and plump, wore the traditional white and black outfit and spoke Baba Malay fluently. She possessed a mild and gentle disposition. Her fluency in the language came as no surprise because all her previous employment had been with Baba families. She quickly adapted to the work expectations of our home. She was a workaholic who kept the house neat and tidy, did the washing and ironing of the laundry, assisted mother in the kitchen, and was altogether the perfect



*Other Ah Sums: Editorial committee member Colin Chee (standing left) and brothers with his Ah Sum.*

domestic helper.

During the Japanese Occupation, there was widespread hardship all over Singapore. Basic commodities were scarce. Everyone was urged to grow their own food. Ah Choon was in her element helping us raise chickens for eggs, rear two pigs, plant tapioca, maize, sweet potato and groundnuts and home-produced coconut oil for our cooking needs. She had done all these in her younger days back in China. She would regale us with stories of her village, including ghost stories which we loved. She was like a grandmother to us young children. Unfortunately, this idyllic scenario did not last.

All *Ah Sums* spent their monthly day off with peers at their *kuli fong* in Chinatown. Soon after the war ended in September 1945, Ah Choon left our home for her usual day of rest at the *kuli fong*. She would normally be back by 6pm, but on that fateful day, she arrived home much later than usual and appeared bedraggled. Immediately, she held a whispered discussion with mother to explain. Mother appeared shocked. For the next couple of days Ah Choon was quiet and listless; then she hurriedly left with her belongings. Mother explained that she was



## FEATURE

Continued from page 13

unwell and needed to take a short rest at her *kuli fong*. We never saw her again. It seemed to be a repeat of the Ah Chin walk-out, but the truth was far more upsetting...

After the war ended, many Allied soldiers were stationed in Singapore while waiting to be sent home to their respective countries. Ah Choon was molested by a young foreign soldier. Scant details came to my knowledge only many years after the incident. According to mother, Ah Choon said

that an Indian soldier dragged her into a drain by the side of the Happy World Amusement Park and molested her. Mother might have wanted to convey more than the word 'molest' when she used the only polite phrase available in our language, '*Dia kena kacho*' (she was molested) to describe what had taken place between the young soldier and elderly maid. The experience traumatized Ah Choon who could not get over the shame although it was not her fault. She

tendered her resignation, explained her distressed state to mother and left. Mother tried to dissuade her but failed.

### End of an era

Ah Choon's departure brought to a close our connection with the *Ah Sums*. On hindsight, it was also the end of the era of *Ah Sums* in Singapore. After 1945, no new *Ah Sums* from China arrived. Those who were still around continued to work before retiring to their homeland after many years of dedicated service.

These women had come to British Malaya in large numbers from early in the 20th century to seek employment. They had taken a vow of celibacy and forged a bond of sisterhood among themselves. They stayed in Chinatown flats that evolved into their unofficial *kuli fong*. There, they waited for employment and also congregated on their monthly rest day. Later, they would stay at the same *kuli fong* awaiting the next ship to ferry them home to China

to retire.

There were a number of ways of employing an *Ah Sum*. The most common approach was by word-of-mouth. A meeting would then be mutually arranged for both parties to negotiate the terms of employment. Another option was for a potential employer to directly approach one of the messes around Chinatown. A desperate employer could make an offer of a higher salary in order to secure a domestic helper fast. Such a move sometimes tempted an off-duty *Ah Sum* to change jobs. Before long, her employer would find a change in her attitude. The maid would be in a foul mood frequently, executing her chores sloppily: this was her unspoken request for a salary increment to match the one on offer. If the employer did not bite, the *Ah Sum* was left with no option but to cite a flimsy excuse and resign. At times, she would simply not return after her day off. Enquiries at the *kuli fong* invariably drew a blank.

Up till the early 1940s, there were two categories of *Ah Sums*: those who preferred to serve only in European homes and those who would work for the locals. The former were more expensively dressed because they were better paid by their employers. They adopted a superior air, were conversant in English and would never condescend to serve under the locals. Their less fortunate sisters were much humbler.

### Part of the family

Many *Ah Sums* worked to a ripe old age under one Baba family and raised generations of children. In their twilight years, they were accorded the same status as a family member, and their talent in cooking celebrated Nyonya cuisine was often unmatched even by the Nyonyas themselves. The few instances when aged or sick *Ah Sums* were unceremoniously sacked by Baba families despite their decades of faithful and dedicated service remains the exception rather than the rule.

In the mid-1980s, while walking along Ann Siang Hill, I encountered an elderly *Ah Sum* who had retired after working for many years for my father's contemporary. She informed me (in flawless Baba Malay) that she was waiting for the next available boat to China and was residing temporarily in a *kuli fong* not far away. It dawned on me that it was to be the last occasion that I would see her and her likes. I pondered the invaluable contributions of her community to Singapore and to the Babas in particular. When we parted, I humbly bade her, *Kamsiah, Ah Por. Selamat jalan.\**



Other Ah Sums: Association committee member Peter Lee as a young boy with his Ah Sum, Yip Ching Sim, on holiday in Cameron Highlands. She is now 99 years old.



# FOUR ON FOUR: DARK SOYA SAUCE

Baba Emeric Lau spends an evening getting saucy and then some

This is the first in a series of four reports on a food-tasting session organised by *The Peranakan*.

In an effort to do something different, this magazine gathered four noted gourmets – Mr Anthony Heng and Nyonyas Bebe Seet, Elizabeth Lee and Helen Lim – and also trawled the supermarket aisles for various food items commonly used in Peranakan cooking. The aim was to sample these condiments in as objective a fashion as possible to uncover their merits.

The products were tasted blind; our tasters then graded each one according to a set of criteria, and were also asked to include additional comments as they fancied. The tasters were not privy to one another's evaluations until after the tasting session. In between each sampling, white bread, water and ground coffee were used to cleanse the palate and nasal passages.

Four products were selected: dark soya sauce (*tauyu*), soya bean paste (*tauchio*), sweet sauce (*tichio*) and rice vermicelli (*bee hoon*). In this issue, we disclose the results of the dark soya sauce (*tauyu*) tasting.

Five dark soya sauces were sampled. Four were supermarket brands.

They were all graded by colour, smoothness, sweetness, consistency and overall taste. They were, in the order of tasting:

1. Kwong Cheong Thye Soya Sauce
2. Angel Thick Soya Sauce
3. A homemade soya sauce from Mr Leong, a Katong-based sauce vendor
4. Cheong Chan
5. Tai Hua

In general, both sauces 1 and 3 were ranked highly for their overall taste. Helen Lim also noted that Kwong Cheong Thye's sauce would be excellent with *babi pongteh*. Mr Leong's sauce was commended for its sweetness and fragrance, and Elizabeth Lee appreciated its smoothness, saying it would be ideal for darkening food and as a dipping.

Sauce 2 was found to be salty with average grades in all categories.

The panel was divided over sauce 4. Anthony Heng found it to be the best in terms of colour and thickness; however, both Elizabeth Lee and Helen Lim found it too bitter, while Bebe Seet said that it lacked fragrance. Elizabeth Lee added that it was not suitable for Cantonese cooking, but could work for Indonesian dishes.

Sauce 5 was unanimously found to be the most diluted and salty. Anthony Heng said that it was a no-no for chicken rice, but could work for a dish like *kong bak*. \*

The next edition of *Four on Four* will feature the panel's opinions on three brands of soya bean paste (*tauchio*).



The food tasting panel (from left): Helen Lim of Rumah Kim Choo, Anthony Heng of Katong Catering, gourmand and passionate cook Elizabeth Lee and Bebe Seet of Rumah Bebe.



Popular *tauyu* brands Kwong Cheong Thye, Angel, Cheong Chan and Taihua.



# BLACK GOLD

Baba Peter Lee pays tribute to the dark, rich treacly soya sauce that is *tauyu*

Soya sauce is, like butter to the French or olive oil to the Italians, one of the pillars of Chinese cuisine. The soya bean has an ancient history as a dietary staple, dating back to the Zhou dynasty where it was referred to as *shu*. The oldest remnants of soya bean were found in archaeological sites dating to the Spring and Autumn period, and more famously, in the digestive tracts of the wife of the Marquis of Dai (Han Dynasty), whose remains were unearthed in Mawangdui, Hunan, in 1972.

Soya sauce, derived from fermenting and salting the bean, was already in existence by the late Zhou period. In the Han period, there are several references to the sauce, *jiang* (or *chio* in Hokkien). In the Song to Ming dynasties the basic necessities were considered to be firewood, rice, oil, salt, soya sauce, vinegar and tea.

The sauce is made by fermenting soya flour or beans and a lightly ground grain (wheat or barley) with a fungus, such as *aspergillus oryzae* – the same, highly toxic and carcinogenic fungus found on the skins of wet peanuts, although apparently no known cancers have been reliably traced to soya sauce – after which it is salted and re-fermented with the same bacteria used in yoghurt, *lactobacillus*. The sauce is then aged to the required degree for light or darker sauces.

Although soya sauce is referred to as *jiang*, or *jiangyou* in the north, and *shiyau* (*siyau*) in Cantonese (*shi* being an alternate term for a fermented sauce), the Hokkiens have long referred to it as *douyou* (*tauyu*

in Hokkien, literally ‘bean oil’).

There is such a wide variety of soya sauces, from the light, salty version to one that is dark, thick and caramelised. To the Babas, *tauyu* is the latter. In traditional Peranakan cooking the light and salty version is almost never used, as perhaps it is more suited to the quick frying, steaming and subtle flavours of, for example, Cantonese cuisine, rather than to Peranakan cooking, which is suffused with robust, aromatic spices and herbs. Plain salt (and *belachan* or shrimp paste!) is the usual preference in the Peranakan *dapor* or kitchen.

Much to my consternation, a quick survey at a supermarket revealed that some brands of *tauyu* on sale in Singapore today do not list soya bean in the list of ingredients! A few are just pure caramel. Cheong Chan, a well-known and popular brand with its signature red paper label, is often mistaken for a *tauyu*, even though the label now clearly defines it as ‘cooking caramel’.

*Tauyu* is added into so many Peranakan dishes, and in many cases is the star ingredient. It is also drizzled (for some people, flooded) as a garnish, and used as a wonderful dip and accompaniment. Like Proust’s tea-soaked madeleines, *tauyu* evokes memories of childhood meals. Anything with *tauyu* in it would be comfort food for a Peranakan. \*

References: K.C. Chang (editor), *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, Yale University, 1977.



## TELOR GORENG

(Fried egg with tauyu on rice)

This is my father’s favourite meal, a ridiculously simple home-style dish that can be prepared in minutes. It was sometimes served to him when he returned home after school for lunch, and he continues to enjoy it today.

1 fried egg

A slice of ham

Cooked rice

Tauyu

Fresh green chillies

Place a slice or two of ham and a fried egg (or two) on a bed of steamed rice. Drizzle a generous amount of *tauyu* and snap some fresh green chillies over the dish.



## AYAM BELACHAN

(Chicken in a tauyu and belachan sauce)

I was first introduced to this dish in the home of my friend Evelyn Lim. If Proust's madeleines brought him back to his childhood, Evelyn's *ayam tauyu belachan* must have brought me back to my past life! It was so deliciously comforting and familiar, even though I had never had it before. Although *tauyu* is not part of the dish's name, it is a primary ingredient.

*1 chicken, cut into medium pieces*

*Two heaped tablespoons sambal belachan*

*2 – 3 tablespoons dark soya sauce*

*1 teaspoon sugar*

Marinate the chicken with all the ingredients for an hour. Pour a little oil in a hot pan, put the chicken in, cover, stir occasionally to ensure chicken does not burn, simmer till cooked and sauce reduces and caramelizes, and oil separates, adding water in the process to prevent the sauce from drying out. Chicken can be replaced with thinly sliced lean pork. Evelyn has never cooked this dish with measurements, having learnt it by watching her grandmother Lim Kam Pek prepare the dish, so the ingredients need to be tuned according to taste.



## BABI TAUYU KUAH

(Minced pork and tauyu soup)

This is another unbelievably simple and delicious concoction from the family kitchen, and again, celebrates the marriage of the flavours of *tauyu* and green chilli.

*400 g minced pork*

*3 tablespoons tauyu*

*3 to 4 cups of water*

*3 fresh green chillies*

Fry the mince meat in oil until meat is cooked. Add in *tauyu* and continue to fry for a few minutes. Add boiling water and simmer for 20 to 30 minutes. Season with salt and serve with fresh green chilli.



## BABI TAUYU

(Pork in tauyu sauce)

This is a variant of a Peranakan classic, which uses lean rather than belly pork, and is stir-fried rather than stewed. It is also a family recipe from Evelyn Lim.

*Thinly sliced lean pork*

*Dark soya sauce*

*Sugar*

*Pepper*

Marinate for about one hour.

Stir-fry in a hot pan with a little oil. Add a little ground chilli if you want a little kick.



*Photography by Jason Ong.*



# PHOENIX RISING: NARRATIVES IN NYONYA BEADWORK FROM THE STRAITS SETTLEMENTS

By Cheah Hwei-Fe'n

Nyonya Linda Chee is riveted by this sumptuous, well-researched tome

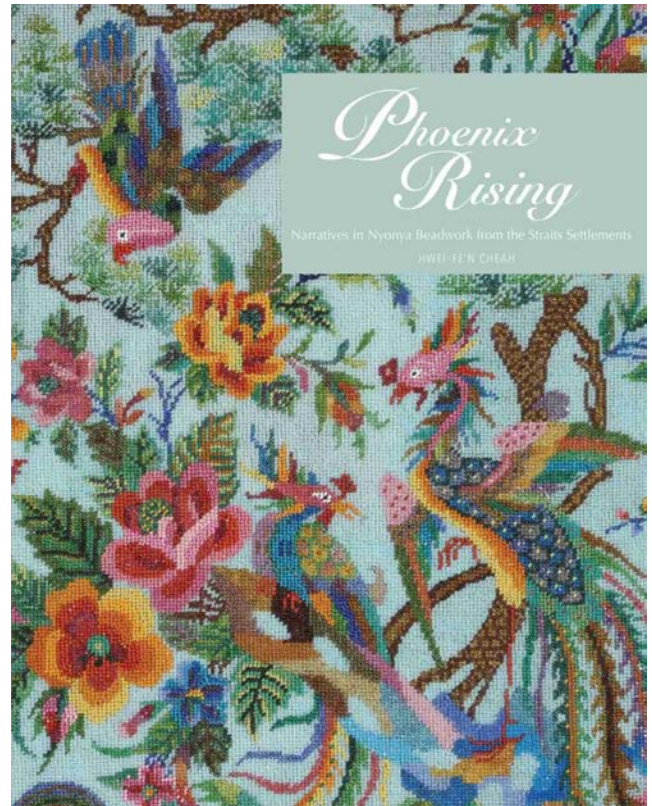
Dedicating her book to the many bibiks, babas and nyonyas whom she interviewed and mentioned, Cheah Hwei-fe'n has authored perhaps the most comprehensive, multi-disciplinary work on Peranakan beading to be found today.

Her book traverses years of study which began as a doctoral thesis completed in 2005 and was published recently. Based in Canberra where she lectures in art history at the Australian National University, Cheah related to me how her interest extended to a labour of love for the art form when we met up recently over lunch with a mutual friend. "I have been interested in needlework for as long as I can remember, first as something to cut up and destroy (!), and later as a product of hand and heart. So embroidery seemed a natural extension of that interest. It was also feasible to look at beadwork as part of that embroidery 'tradition'," said the soft spoken nyonya author, whose disposition struck me to be as *alus* (gentle and refined) as the art of beadwork.

*Phoenix Rising* is not a book on beading per se. It is meticulously compiled in three interlocking parts as narratives, looking through different lens: the social role of beadwork, its development through time and space (including a chronology of beadwork), and its significance today.

More than just on techniques and types, the significance of this tome is its analysis of the practice, styles and rich imagery of nyonya beadwork against the wider social, cultural and historical landscapes of Peranakan Chinese society from the past to present day. In doing so, Cheah has superbly married the intellectual with the aesthetic, and presented a visual feast of stunning and superb works from numerous collections in South-east Asia, Europe and the United States.

The book explores the community's transformations through the window of nyonya beadwork. The narratives trace how nyonya beading motifs, styles and use of materials manifested the changes in lifestyles, aspirations and ideals through



the turn of the 20th century to World War Two and succeeding decades. Events and influences from Europe also had a profound impact on the art form in this region.

Between 1870 and 1920, the golden age of Peranakan Chinese society, many nyonyas were not schooled and could not write. The symbols and images they chose for their beadwork speak out as a collective voice or history, enriching studies on Peranakan Chinese society. Beading is suggested as a tool of control and of the subjugation of nyonyas to being domesticated daughters and dutiful wives in the household. As nyonyas became more educated and exposed to western culture, going to the movies was among some newfound liberties that inspired novel motifs like Snow White and even Mickey Mouse!

Cheah goes to great lengths for her subject, researching on bead imports and even obtaining images of bead sample cards from museums in Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) and Paris, and visiting places and people such as renowned beader and collector Luigi Cattelan in Murano (Venice).



Whether subliminally or not, I believe Cheah's long lineage spanning generations from Malacca has benefitted the book with an insider perception and insights although the author modestly says "I can hardly claim nyonya status though I do feel increasingly that it is time for me to learn. Pity I can't turn the clock back 20 or 30 years!"

She quipped: "I have never been very conscious of being Peranakan or otherwise, except that part of my extended family speak Baba Malay to each other and we eat *nyonya bak chang* with *gula melaka* at home (...not that the latter is necessarily Peranakan)! Nevertheless I had to remind myself not to make assumptions."

Rather than provide an exhaustive catalogue of nyonya beadwork, her intent is to tell the "story" of this unique art "as object and practice, exploring its manifold meanings as art, craft and history." Cheah leaves generous space for others to address and research: "What do we know of the nyonya beadwork of Sumatra and Java (especially as relatively 'early' examples might exist), or the relationships with



beadwork in Vietnam? What about Chinese sources?

We know that beadwork was imported from Java for the nyonias in the 20th century, but what was the extent of "commercial" beading or workshops?

How did these impact on the development of beadwork and embroidery designs?" she asks.

Beading expert and collector Regina Wong feels there is no equivalent to *Phoenix Rising*. "It is the only work that shows how Peranakan beading is interlinked with the world. This book has it all, especially for anyone who knows nothing about beading." \*

*Phoenix Rising: Narratives in Nyonya Beadwork from the Straits Settlements (2010)* is published by NUS Press, Singapore. Available at all major bookstores in Singapore including Borders, Kinokuniya, MPH, Times and the bookstore at the NUS Kent Ridge campus (please check for address at [www.nus.edu.sg/nuspress](http://www.nus.edu.sg/nuspress)) or email [nusbooks@nus.edu.sg](mailto:nusbooks@nus.edu.sg) to order.

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# WHAT'S EATING GUNONG SAYANG?

Nyonya Adelene Lim has the scoop on the venerable troupe's centennial production, *Pagar Makan Padi*



The family portrait that inspired the play. Family feuding and intrigue are the order of the day in the script that revolves around an adopted child.

This year's production, *Pagar Makan Padi*, scores many "firsts" – it will be Gunong Sayang's first time staging a production at the Drama Centre; it will be the first time we are inviting actor friends from Malacca for cameo roles; Baba Frederick Soh's first time as a scriptwriter and the first time where the stage set will remain unchanged throughout. Also, it forms part of GSA's Centennial Celebration dedicated to the Peranakan community which has been very supportive of all our roadshows, performances, as well as cultural activities.

Gunong Sayang's centennial play is written by Baba Frederick, whose experience in *Wayang* (theatre) Peranakan began with 1999's *Janji Perot*. It was his first taste of acting when he played a teenage boy.

Frederick was ecstatic when his script was given the go-ahead for staging by Baba Victor Goh, GSA's President. First written in 2008, Frederick shares his inspiration for the play: "I chanced upon a book, *From the Family Album*, introduced by Gretchen Liu, that showed portraits from the Lee Brothers Studio between 1910 and 1925. I was particularly drawn to the cover picture. It was a family portrait but what was peculiar was that there was a boy in the picture who was clearly seen as not part of the family.

I asked around for people's opinion on this picture and concluded that he may be an *anak koe pang* (adopted child). I was inspired to write a story about what could have happened in this family."

As chance would have it, the photograph that captured Frederick's attention was one of our member's grandparents' portraits! It made us feel a

real connection to this production.

After going through several drafts with senior cast members K T, Y M Lee, Baba Victor and director Tony Quek, *Pagar Makan Padi* was selected as the play's title, from the proverb *Harapkan Pagar, Pagar Makan Padi*. \*

## *Pagar Makan Padi* (Unreliable)

This story revolves around the household of Bibik Eng Neo. After the death of her husband who left her his inheritance, Bibik Eng Neo, who has only one son longs to have a grandchild to continue the family line as well as the business.

Her son, Roy and his wife, Nelly have been married for many years but there is still no sign of a child. The matriarch decides to take matters into her own hands and adopts a child, Tommy. Soon after, Roy and Nelly have two biological children of their own, a son, Robert, and a daughter, Daisy.

The kids grow up, but Nelly never regarded Tommy as part of the family. The family home becomes a place of daily feuding between the spoilt Robert and Daisy, who sides with Tommy.

It takes a major turn of events in the home before the family finds out who Tommy's biological mother is, and also the importance of kinship even though Tommy is an adopted child.

*Pagar Makan Padi* will be staged at the Drama Centre, National Library, from 15 October 2010 (gala night) to 17 October 2010. Tickets for the evening and matinee shows are from \$25 to \$55, available at all SISTIC outlets and online at [www.sistic.com.sg](http://www.sistic.com.sg).

Visit [www.gunongsayang.wordpress.com](http://www.gunongsayang.wordpress.com) and [www.gunongsayang.org](http://www.gunongsayang.org) or email: [gunongsayangassociation@yahoo.com.sg](mailto:gunongsayangassociation@yahoo.com.sg). Join "Pagar Makan Padi (Unreliable)" on Facebook.





CHAKAP CHAKAP

## REVIVING THE PERANAKAN HERITAGE AND CULTURE



Katong and Joo Chiat have been in need of champions to restore its Peranakan heritage. Over the past several years, one such individual, among several others, has taken it upon himself to try to do just that. Tony Tan, the owner and operator of Betel Box, a backpackers' hostel in Joo Chiat, takes some time out to share his passion with Baba Colin Chee.



**“No other residents of a place or district in Singapore exudes so much pride in who they are and what they are about than those living in Joo Chiat and Katong”**  
– Tony Tan

**Why are you so committed to reviving the Peranakan Heritage in Joo Chiat and Katong?**

When I was in my teens, I remembered little of Joo Chiat and Katong except for food and family. This changed significantly when I returned to Singapore after 10 years away and was looking for an authentic cultural venue to start a backpackers' hostel. I suppose it's like falling in love with a good friend who has been around in the shadows all this while. My most vivid memories are from 8 years ago, when I met traders who have been here for a long time, keen to chat and proud of what they do and then, meeting residents who have been living in the district for generations reminiscing of Katong past and present. These causal encounters led me on to a journey of discovery of the Peranakans in Joo Chiat and Katong which showed me that nostalgia and cultural pride are not lost in modern Singapore; this is why I have since become an advocate of heritage and also of Peranakan culture in Joo Chiat and Katong.

**What elements in the neighbourhood do you see as key to this effort and that promise success?**

The residents and the heritage shops, without a doubt. No other place or district in Singapore exudes so much pride in who they are and what they are about

than those living in Joo Chiat and Katong. For example, most districts in Singapore do not even have a name to describe residents in their community; we have three - Katongites, Eastcoasters and recently Joo Chatters. The traditional traders are the unsung heroes; as well as traditional crafts, products and services superseded by modernity but recently revived by television programs seeking authenticity in our culture.

**What have you done to date?**

I have built a backpackers' hostel in the heart of Joo Chiat which has served over 35,000 travellers and created a tour of the district that has shown over 3,000 tourists the gems of our community. We were recognised for our efforts by being voted by Hostelworld customers as the "No. 1 Hostel in Singapore 2008" and we won the Singapore Tourism Board's Singapore Experience Awards 2009 for Best Travel Experience.

**Going forward, what would you like to see happen in order that this dream be further realised?**

My dream is that the Singapore way of life and Peranakan culture must be introduced to any visitor to Singapore. The diversity of Malay, Straits Chinese, Eurasian, Arab and Indian cultures in Joo Chiat and Katong and its architecture are irreplaceables which need to be celebrated and encouraged. Commercial relevance must be matched by community pride for sustainability.

**There is so much talk about making Joo Chiat a Peranakan Town. What can you say about this?**

Just as Katong is no longer a constituency but a concept of *gotong royong* and leisure lifestyles, I see Joo Chiat Peranakan Town as a living testimony of our cultural pride and aspirations. I don't believe in the Disneyfication of the Peranakan culture but rather a celebration and protection of the things we hold dear - our way of life, family, trades and community. I'm a third generation Chinese in Singapore but it gives me much joy when neighbours refer to me as "Baba" for that's when I know I'm accepted as a member of this community. \*

Photography by  
Colin Chee.



# IT'S ALL ABOUT COMMUNITY

Baba Emeric Lau welcomes The Peranakan Association's new ties with Joo Chiat CC

The Association's aim to take Peranakan culture to the wider community received a boost in the forging of ties with the Joo Chiat Community Club (CC), an area that many Singaporean Peranakans proudly call home.

Together, the Association and CC will strive to develop the Katong and Joo Chiat suburbs into a recognised cultural hub for all things Peranakan, with regular Peranakan-themed activities. Both the Association and CC committees are also working to jointly organise an annual Peranakan Festival along with support from other heritage associations and key government bodies.

It was Baba Edmond Wong, our Committee member, who first mooted the idea of creating a "Peranakan Town" around Katong and Joo Chiat. Together with his brother, Association members Raymond Wong and Gavin G Chan, a warm and close link with the CC has been established.

"Its time has come. We just needed someone to champion and to nurture the idea. The Peranakan Town concept will go a long way towards affirming



The Association and CC aim to develop Katong and Joo Chiat into a recognised Peranakan hub. Left: Heritage houses in the Joo Chiat district.

Joo Chiat as Singapore's Peranakan hub," said Baba Colin Chee, spokesman for the Save Joo Chiat Workgroup, which first lobbied for Joo Chiat to be promoted as a heritage district.

Saturday, 26 June marked the first in what should soon evolve into a regular series of events at the CC. A "Malam Peranakan" was held with 250 diners at Joo Chiat CC. The evening was graced by our former President, Baba Lee Kip Lee, current President, Baba Peter Wee, and Joo Chiat CC's committee members, including MP Dr Chan Soo Sen.

A splendid buffet line-up was put together by Flavours and Spices, while our sister association,

Left: MCs KT and Ming keep everyone entertained.

Right: Some 250 guests tuck into a hearty nyonya dinner.







Above: MP Chan Soo Sen jogets with Nyonya Christine Ong.

Right: Young and old buat lao jiat!



The Gunong Sayang Association, provided entertainment by MCs K T and Ming, and The Bibik Singers. The Dendang Irama Band was also on hand providing non-stop 'live' music.

After several rounds of song, a "Best-Dressed Nyonya" contest and humorous banter from the capable MCs, the babas and nyonyas took to the floor for a spontaneous round of joget. It was truly Joo Chiat buat lao jiat! ✱

Photographs courtesy of Peter Lim of [www.peterlimstudio.com](http://www.peterlimstudio.com)



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## EVENTS

# MARTHA STEWART IN THE (BABA) HOUSE!

America's domicile queen gets acquainted with nyonya dumplings ... and some very lucky Babas, including *The Peranakan's* Peter Lee

Much like every Peranakan house in the past, the altar to the household deity, *Guan Gong*, takes pride of place in the reception hall of the NUS Baba House. Who would ever imagine that the most celebrated media mogul and contemporary global household deity, Martha Stewart, yes THE Martha Stewart, would step through its front door to understand a little bit about Peranakan heritage and to introduce it to her millions of viewers all over the world?

Martha Stewart graciously endured the sweltering heat of a late morning in June, looking elegant and both flawlessly and naturally youthful, to do what she clearly loves best: talking about and discovering new flavours for her show, within an environment she expressively approves of. "Your efforts at preservation are ADMIRABLE" she inscribed, in Baba House's guest book.



Photograph courtesy of NUS Baba House

The filmed segment on Baba House, put together by her awe-inspiring production team who worked through day and night while still managing to look eternally fresh and cheerful, included a nyonya *kueh chang* (dumpling) wrapping and beadwork demonstration by brothers Raymond and Edmond Wong of Rumah Kim Choo. This will be part of a Singapore feature to be aired sometime in the autumn of 2010. ✱

More details of Martha's Baba House visit can be found on her blog: <http://www.themarthablog.com/2010/07/visiting-the-baba-house-in-singapore.html>

## BABA GOES TO PARIS

Nyonya Linda Chee lauds the crossing of Peranakan culture to European shores

Vive la France! That's where our culture is next headed. Key exhibits from the overwhelmingly successful Baba Bling exhibition at the Peranakan Museum will be on show at the *Musée du Quai Branly* (MQB) in Paris from 5 October this year to 6 February next year.

Some 500 artefacts will be on display in the first showcase of Peranakan culture at MQB, one of the few European museums with a world-renowned collection of artefacts from the non-western cultures of the world.

Covering a space of 1,500 sq metres, the special gallery will feature star pieces like the million-bead tablecloth that was recently restored, the Catholic altar, a superb star brooch and a large *kamcheng*.

It also marks the first time that a Singapore National Museum is presenting an exhibition in one of the major museums in Europe. French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong are patrons of the exhibition.

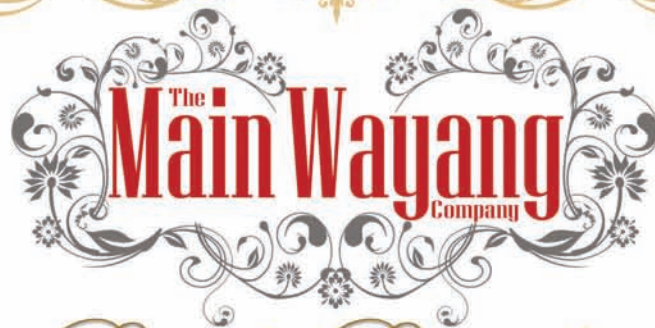


Photograph courtesy of The Peranakan Museum

"MQB is very interested in fusion cultures and the interactions of cultural influences in societies and has exhibitions on such themes as part of their programming," said a Peranakan Museum spokesman. ✱

The Peranakan Museum is putting some 500 artefacts on show at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris.





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# WORLD, HERE WE COME!

The Peranakan culture is happily gaining more global exposure, as Baba Richard Tan reports

The Main Wayang (MW) Company's 2010 vision to promote our Baba culture to a global audience is truly growing at a phenomenal rate. Some mega scale events involve the mass recruitment of singers and dancers by the hundreds. In the process, MW has gained a faithful following of Peranakan families and friends who generously give their time and effort to be performers, as clearly reflected in MW's Facebook group which has toted up more than 900 members.

In this year's Lunar New Year festivities, over 200 babas and nyonyas together with special guests from *The Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka* (PPCM), delighted thousands of spectators as they *gelek-ed* (strutted) their way down the F1 Pit Stop to an original song, "Celebrate Joget" in the largest ever Chingay Parade. The show was televised to many other Asian countries.

A week later, MW flew to Penang at the invitation of Dato Seri Khoo Keat Siew and the Penang Straits Chinese Association to perform for their annual Association's Lunar New Year Dinner & *Chap Goh Meh* Celebrations.

In April, MW hosted Discovery Travel & Living celebrity Samantha Brown to a *Joget* Party at the Peranakan Museum. Samatha was given a 'nyonya make-over' by Nyonya Daisy of Nyonya Novelties while I taught her to *joget* and *gelek!* Look out for Samantha's Nyonya episode on cable TV!

Come 14 August, another 100 young babas and nyonyas from MW will be featured in the Youth



A rousing parade at Chingay 2010.



Olympics Opening Ceremony during the 'WELCOME' segment in a performance choreographed by our resident choreographer Jackie Pereira. This grand event will be beamed 'live' to over 205 nations and billions are expected to watch it on television the world over. ✱



A nyonya episode on cable TV is coming soon after Samantha Brown of Discovery Travel & Living (centre) discovers Peranakan roots!



## EVENTS

# PERANAKAN VOICES

Nyonya Anne Chia reports on the Peranakan Voices' busy calendar

Performing at a Chetti Melaka Association event.

Over a thousand students at Pioneer Junior College were treated to a rousing afternoon of music and culture by the Peranakan Voices (PV) on 15 April.

Baba Chan Eng Thai shared on the Anglicised lifestyle of the Chinese Peranakans during the colonial days to a rapt audience. The PV took to the stage after that with three lilting songs including its very own version of *Yueliang Daibiao Wo de Xin* ('The Moon Represents My Heart') in Mandarin, Malay and English.

Exactly a month later, on 15 May, the PV performed for the Chetti Melaka Association of Singapore at their 3rd Annual General Meeting held at the Lagun Sari Restaurant at Joo Chiat Road.



Other performers at the annual dinner included the Gunong Sayang and Chetti Melaka Associations.

A highlight of the evening was PV's Kelvyn Saw's saxophone solo in two songs - *Bengawan Solo* and *Blue Heaven*.

The evening was memorable for its gathering of all the Singapore Peranakan associations to perform and preserve our unique culture. ✱

The Peranakan Voices welcomes members who would like to join them! Please email [pv@peranakan.org.sg](mailto:pv@peranakan.org.sg) for more information.

Would you like the Peranakan Voices to perform at your event or function? Please email [alvin@busads.com.sg](mailto:alvin@busads.com.sg).

# CELEBRATING THE KUEH CHANG FESTIVAL DOWN UNDER

Nyonya Ivy Lee-Chan Gek Kim gets together with Peranakans and friends for a dumpling treat

Raffle winner Soo (right) receiving her floral prize from Datin Ong.

On 20 June, a capacity crowd of 81 members and friends of the Peranakan Association, Australia Inc. (PAA) got together to celebrate the Kueh Chang (Dumpling) Festival.



An *ikebana* (Japanese floral arrangement) demonstration by renown *ikebana* and ceramic artist Datin Ong Kid Ching, *origami* (paper-folding) workshop and a *panton* recital were among the highlights at the gathering. Resident *panton* composer, Kim San, delighted us yet once again with his special composition for the day:

*Daun bambu datang dari mana,  
Diri linggi kenapa mau tanya?  
Kueh chang abu bak chang Cina,  
Sedap lagi kueh chang nyonya.*

A raffle was held with the floral arrangements as prizes, to the delight of the lucky winners. President of the PAA, Alfred Chi, took the opportunity to encourage members to attend the Phuket convention in November.

We were treated to a sumptuous lunch spread of *mee siam*, *rojak*, *nonya kueh*, *kee chang* and of course the highlight of the day - *nyonya chang*. A dance session led by resident Association dance instructress Olga provided a most enjoyable finale to the day's event. ✱



# A ROYAL ENCOUNTER IN PHUKET

Baba Chan Eng Thai reports on the International Peranakan Symposium

The International Peranakan Symposium held in Phuket from 27 – 28 May was a right royal treat, graced by the presence of no less than the Princess Royal of Thailand, Her Royal Highness Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, as the Guest-of-Honour.

The two-day Symposium had wide support from the various Peranakan Associations in the region. The Peranakan Association of Singapore was represented by Baba Peter Wee and me (Eng Thai), the Gunong Sayang Association by Baba Victor Goh Liang Chuan, the Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur Selangor (PPBNKLS) by Dr Lee Su Kim and Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) by Ms Chin Siok Hoon.

Also present at the opening ceremony on 27 May at the Royal Phuket City Hotel were Mr Khoo Boo Chia, a former curator of the Penang Museum and some 150 students from various high schools in Phuket, together with luminaries such as the Deputy Secretary to the Prime Minister of Thailand, Khun Anchalee Tephabuttra; the Senator of Phuket, Khun Phummisak Hongsyok; Dr Narong Hongyok, the Managing Director of Anuphas & Sons, who comes from an eminent Baba family in Phuket; and virtually all the general managers of most of the resorts on Phuket!

After the Princess toured an exhibition on the contributions and cultural practices of the Peranakans of Phuket, Baba Peter Wee and I were given the joint honour with Dr Lee Su Kim and Ms Chin Siok Hoon, of presenting gifts to Her Royal Highness. All the gifts to the Princess will be placed in the new Baba Peranakan Museum of Phuket which will occupy the former Standard Chartered Bank building and the old Police Station in Phuket City.

The next day, a panel of speakers comprising Baba Peter Wee, Dr Lee, Ms Chin and the ever-energetic Arjhan Pranee Sakulpipatana, the Vice-President of the Thai Peranakan Association Phuket, gave their views on the various aspects of Peranakan culture and engaged in dialogue with symposium delegates.

Dr Lee spoke on 'The Resurgence or Decline of the Peranakans', bringing in the experience of her own family. I presented 'The Common Traits of the Peranakans of Singapore, Malaysia and Phuket', covering the historical links



Baba Chan Eng Thai presenting a specially written panton (poem) to Princess Sirindhorn. In the centre is our Association President Baba Peter Wee.

of the various communities and the efforts at sustaining the traditions and practices of the Peranakans among the younger generation.

Baba Cedric Tan of the PPBNKLS enthralled all with a visual presentation of the traditional Peranakan wedding and its rituals and significance, from the engagement ceremony right up to the 12th day of the wedding.

Mr Khoo shared the plans and layout of the upcoming Baba Peranakan Museum of Phuket, which was based on his experience of setting up a living museum for the Khoo Kongsi in Penang.

All the high school students joined in the lunch, with the compliments of the Phuket association, a truly generous and far-sighted gesture which speaks volumes for the concerted effort by the association to disseminate and instill pride among the future generations of babas and nyonyas in Phuket. \*

The Princess and the Peranakans.





# A BABA AND A GENTLEMAN

Nyonya Ch'ng Kim See recounts the life and times of Dr Goh Keng Swee

**D**r Goh Keng Swee was born on 6 October 1918 in Malacca at 122, Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock (Heeren Street) to a Peranakan family. He died in Singapore on 14 May 2010 at the age of 91.

Dr Goh started his working life as a civil servant before the Second World War, and resumed it after the war. He later quit and entered politics as a founding member of the People's Action Party (PAP), serving in the Singapore Cabinet for 25 years, the last 11 of which as Deputy Prime Minister. He retired from active politics in 1984, but continued to be involved in various capacities

Tun Tan Siew Sin, the second, and the first Finance Minister of independent Malaya and Malaysia, the son of Tan Cheng Lock, was a cousin.

Dr Goh's family, unlike Tan Cheng Lock's and mainstream Babas, was staunchly Methodist to which his mother Swee Eng had converted and later married Methodist Baba Goh Leng Inn from Singapore where his wealthy family lived. The elder Goh, whose ancestors hailed from Banjarmasin (southeast of Indonesian Kalimantan (Borneo), then moved to Malacca. In 1920 when Dr Goh was two, the family relocated to Singapore, as did many Malacca Babas and Chinese before

and after them, with the founding of Singapore in 1819.

Dr Goh's uniquely unsurpassed political and national development contributions to Singapore have been richly documented in the multifaceted political roles he played: as Finance Minister, Interior and Defence Minister, and Education Minister. 'He created new jobs by [building] 'a manufacturing sector to attract multinational corporations to invest'. He established the Economic Development Board, also to

draw foreign multinational companies to Singapore. He converted '15 thousand acres of swampland... into a modern industrial park'. He introduced 'National Service and the building of the Singapore Armed Forces'. He created 'Singapore's first defence hardware company Chartered Industries of Singapore'. He introduced the school streaming policy and gifted education programme, set up the Curriculum Development Institute and laid the foundation for computerisation in schools. And he founded the Jurong Bird Park and the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. Rightly so, he earned the nickname, 'Mr Fix It'.

Touted as the 'architect of Singapore's economic miracle', he was there at the right time, seizing



*Dr Goh, guest of honour at a Tourist Agents Society dinner with guests including (from left) JYM Pillay, his cousin Mrs Alice Scott-Ross (daughter of Tun Tan Cheng Lock), and committee member Khoo Kay Eng, 1970s.*

until he suffered a stroke in 1999, followed by another in 2000.

Dr Goh's passing marks the end of an era of Baba influence on the Singapore and Malaysian polity. His local roots can be traced to the first Malacca ancestor, Tan Hay Kuan, who hailed from the province of Fujian, China over some 200 years ago. Dr Goh was a nephew of Tun Tan Cheng Lock, the well-known Baba politician and businessman of Malacca during the British colonial period and after independence.

They shared the same ancestor, Tan Choon Bock (great grandfather and grandfather respectively) who was credited with accumulating enormous wealth which firmly established his descendants in Malacca and Singapore. The late



the moment at every opportunity to advance Singapore. His reputation as an unrelenting no-nonsense executor of ideas and plans preceded him. Furthermore, he had the unequivocal backing of then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who had referred to him as his 'alter ego'. In his eulogy, Mr Lee said, 'He made the greatest difference...'

A man of brilliant educational distinction and intellect, he obtained a doctorate in economics from the London School of Economics in 1956, a rare feat in that time.

He was sensitive to and thoughtful of developments in the region that had impact on the fledgling nation state of Singapore. In 1965 soon after the end of the Indonesian 'confrontation', or *Konfrontasi*, against the formation of Malaysia, and after the formation of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) in 1967, he conceptualized a research institute to study and understand developments in Southeast Asia. This resulted in the establishment, by an Act of Parliament, of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), which was gazetted in June 1968.

There was no such research institute devoted to the study of Southeast Asia. Academia was embryonic. Dr Goh sought the help of three successive western academics well-grounded in the study of the region – Harry Benda (Yale University), Josef Silverstein (Rutgers University) and John Legge (Monash University) – to head the Institute over a successive period of three years to inject the initial ballast to the direction of the Institute.

In the meantime he scoured the world for a suitable Southeast Asian academic to direct it in the long term. In 1972 after tenacious persuasion, he managed to attract Kernial Singh Sandhu, a Malaysian academic then teaching in Canada, to head the Institute. Professor Sandhu served for 20 years until his untimely death in 1992.

Dr Goh's response to the perceived need for Singapore to revisit its traditional values led him to establish the Institute of East Asian Philosophies (IEAP) in 1983, a major part of which was to conduct 'creative research' on Confucian teachings in China, Japan and Korea that 'will involve the constant re-examination of Confucian teachings to make them more relevant to Singapore's needs.' Later, in 1992,

**"My ambition is to become an engineer. China needs engineers, scientists, inventors and sailors badly. She has not a respectable navy and air force and so to have these things she needs people to produce them, and keep them going. So China needs soldiers, sailors and airmen to help her become one of the best nations in the world. She needs useful men, and for me engineering is the thing."**

cognizant of the impending rise of mainland China, the adaptive Dr Goh changed its focus to that of the Institute of East Asian Political Economy (IEAPE). He himself directed the Institute at each turn. Finally in 1997, he reorientated its focus to the East Asian Institute and appointed eminent Chinese scholar, ex-Malaysian, Professor Wang Gungwu

to be its Director, while he assumed the Chairmanship.

The Chinese leader Deng Xiao Peng, having noted Dr Goh's achievements in the economic success of Singapore, invited him in June 1985, to be 'an economic consultant to the coastal areas of China. Dr Goh was to study and make recommendations on the development of China's coastal states and economic zones.'

This fulfilled a teenage

dream, albeit as an economist, but not as an engineer, of which he had written in 1931, in the first issue of his Anglo Chinese School's *The A C S Magazine*:

**"My ambition is to become an engineer. China needs engineers, scientists, inventors and sailors badly. She has not a respectable navy and air force and so to have these things she needs people to produce them, and keep them going. So China needs soldiers, sailors and airmen to help her become one of the best nations in the world. She needs useful men, and for me engineering is the thing."**

Dr Goh's China consultancy won him accolades from Deng Xiao Peng who 'in his celebrated Nanxun speech singled out Singapore as a country that had achieved both rapid economic growth and good social order...[He] urged China to "learn from Singapore" and later to "do better than Singapore"'.

My only encounter with Dr Goh was brief but it further reinforced my view of the man as a profound and prescient thinker and pragmatic activist, one who saw potential in many situations elsewhere that Singapore could learn from, adopt and benefit from related developments. In 1989, he called me on the



*Baba Dr Goh served in the Singapore Cabinet for 25 years, the last 11 as Deputy Prime Minister. Serving the PAP: A young Dr Goh with Toh Chin Chye and Lee Kuan Yew.*



## A TRIBUTE

Continued from page 31



*Baba Dr Goh at a passing-out parade.*

phone and asked if I could do a thorough search for him on any accounts about the unabated Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. He explained, "I see some parallels for Singapore. We have a vibrant mix of many communities and religions that accommodate one

another, just as Sri Lanka had. So we cannot take our peaceful co-existence for granted. I want to organize a group of academics and practitioners to study the root causes of the ethnic strife there."

In those days there were no Internet, Google or online library catalogues, but the ISEAS Library rallied to his needs. We produced a package of lists, books and documents and delivered them to his office. A few months passed before he called me again to say, "Ms Ch'ng, I am afraid we have to abandon the project as I cannot raise the money for it. I am so sorry to have wasted your time." He initiated the exercise, called me himself instead of through his staff, and he closed it with much courtesy and mindfulness. This was the measure of the man, an extraordinary man. \*

*Ch'ng Kim See, a 7th generation nyonya, is Head, ISEAS Library, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. For the full version of this article, including listings of selected works by and on Dr Goh Keng Swee, please go to [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg).*

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# REMEMBERING JOSEPHINE

Baba Alvin Yapp remembers his time with Bibik Josephine Tan, one of the most constant and familiar faces at Peranakan events over the last few decades, a well-loved Katong resident, and mother of our Association President Peter Wee

My earliest memory of 'Mama' was in Holy Family Church. She would sit in her *sarong kebaya* in the front pew every Sunday morning and religiously follow the service. Despite the inconvenience of being wheelchair-bound, she would never fail to keep her Sunday obligation.

I started sharing a special relationship with Mama by assisting her into her wheelchair after Church every Sunday. We never spoke about ourselves, but rather chatted about what was happening around us, like the weather and the traffic. I soon came to realise that Mama always had a ready smile and a handshake for everyone

remembered with amazing accuracy. For instance, when I occasionally drove her home, she could direct me with precision at every road

turning to ensure we took the shortest route to her home in Dunbar Walk. She would also recite her prayers, remembering each word and how the sequence of each prayer should be recited.



Mama Josephine was the mother of Peter and Joseph Wee.

Mama enjoyed Peranakan food and demanded her fair share of condiments like *chinchalok* and *sambal belachan*. Often I had to pretend that I had already mixed the *sambal belachan* with her food due to her diet constraints. She was never fooled and I always ended up being told off for trying to deceive her!

Mama also had a sweet tooth. She would often compliment about a fruit if it was to her liking. "Very nice!" she would turn to me and say, and I took that as a hint to offer her a second serving. But if the fruit was even mildly sour, she would squint her eyes tightly and nothing would cajole her to have another bite.

Mama loved playing cards. Till today, I am baffled at how fast she was able to mentally calculate and recognise the different permutations of the cards on the table. I would inevitably lose on all the occasions when she allowed me to play with her; she was clearly a champion at her own game.

I also remember fondly how Mama loved paper napkins. She would busy herself folding them. Occasionally, she might offer you one, and if you refused, it wouldn't come twice as she would quickly stow it in her red *batik* bag.



who approached her. She would often greet strangers who approached her with "How are you?" and before the person could reply, would turn to me and ask "Siapa tu?" (Who is that?). Often, I wouldn't know the person and could only reply saying it was probably her friend. It didn't surprise me that Mama couldn't remember the many acquaintances she met in church, after all, she never could remember my name!

There were, however, things that Mama

Left: Josephine's father, Tan Cheng Kee, owned Singapore's first cinema, Alhambra Theatre, at Beach Road. The theatre screened silent movies of Charlie Chaplin and Tarzan in the early 1900s.





**1940s:** The family home was at 67, Waterloo Street. Josephine was the princess of the household and never had to do any housework. The 15,000sq ft house and compound was later acquired by the government and demolished.

*Left: August 1930: Josephine, 16, is engaged to Wee Guan Hong, 20. Seated in the middle is Reverend Father Lionel Cordero.*

**1970s:** Josephine moved to Dunbar Walk, where she lived till her death. She also went on pilgrimages to the Holy Lands in the Middle East.

**1980s:** Josephine was unofficially dubbed the "Queen of Parkway" due to the long hours she spent at Parkway Parade.

She also maintained a lifelong confidante in Olive Moss, her hairdresser and close friend.



*Left: Josephine with confidante Olive Moss - they had just drawn eyebrows on each other.*

*Bottom left: Josephine with her father, Tan Cheng Kee.*

Mama was one of the few persons I knew who lived through the height of the Peranakan era. With her passing on 22 March this year, one cannot help but feel that a chapter of the culture has closed. For me, this is the passing of a lady whom I had learned to love and respect for living each day as a gift from God.

### Josephine Tan Pin Neo: select biography

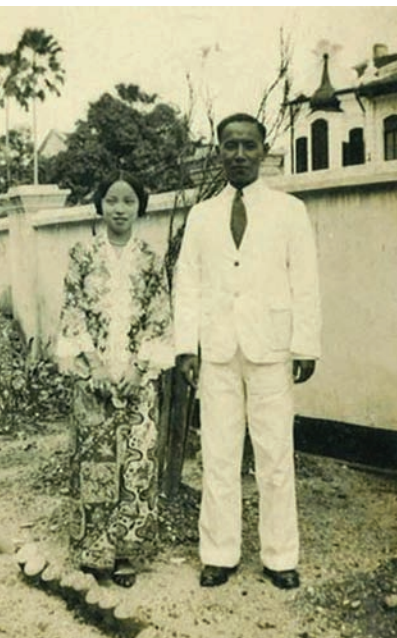
**1913:** Josephine was born in the year of the Tiger; the only daughter of Tan Cheng Kee (son of Tan Keong Saik).

**1920s:** She was educated at CHIJ (Victoria Street). This cloistered life, full of prayer and discipline instilled her lifelong faith, Catholicism. She

attended church daily at St Peter and Paul's Church and was an active member of the Sodality of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows and in the Third Order of St Francis.

**1930s:** Josephine's betrothal was arranged through her father and father-in-law. The engagement was very long - five years! Possibly, this was to ascertain suitability, she being born in the year of the Tiger. The wedding ceremony

lasted three days and was held at the Church of St Theresa. Her first son Peter Wee was born in 1937. Her second son Joseph Wee was born in 1946.



## A TREASURE TROVE OF VINTAGE COLLECTIBLES

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## 23rd BABA CONVENTION 20 – 22 November 2010 Phuket

The 23rd Baba Convention will be a grand event to be held this year from 20 - 22 November 2010 in Phuket, coinciding with the Loy Krathong Festival.

The convention package includes:

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- Two dinners, dance and a Miss Loy Krathong-Nang Noppamas event. (Welcome party on Nov 20 and Baba Convention Loy Krathong Night on 21 Nov);
- Seminar and activities on Nov 21
- A hot pot party with Phuket Baba-style food at Nai Yang Beach on 22 Nov.

*Details are subject to change. For bookings and cost of convention package, please contact our Hon.Secretary, Mrs Lim Geok Huay at Tel.62550704.*



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# THE PERANAKAN GUIDE • SINGAPORE

## MUSEUMS



**Peranakan Museum.** 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 Nyonyas. Singapore's newest boutique museum examines the centres of Peranakan culture in Malacca, Penang and Singapore, and traces its links to as far as Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand.

Peranakan Museum, 39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941.

website: [www.peranakanmuseum.sg](http://www.peranakanmuseum.sg)

Email: [nhb\\_pm\\_vs@nhb.gov.sg](mailto:nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg)

Tel: +65 6332 2982.

**National Museum of Singapore.** The museum's Singapore History Gallery pays tribute to the contributions of the pioneering Peranakans. On view are some outstanding artefacts, including the oil portrait of Lim Boon Keng, old photographs, jewellery and sireh 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, sireh 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 which is worth a stroll. Visit Guan Antiques nearby at Kampong Bahru Road, a treasure trove of Peranakan heirlooms.

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

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



**Katong and Joo Chiat.** Perhaps the nerve centre of Peranakan life in Singapore. In its heyday it was the site of nearby grand seaside villas and elaborate Peranakan terraced houses. The latter can still be seen in a walk along Koon Seng Road. Also visit Peranakan shops such as Katong Antique House (208 East Coast Road) and Rumah Bebe (113 East Coast Road) as well as the great variety of

Peranakan restaurants in the neighbourhood. [http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/what\\_to\\_see/suburban\\_living/katong.html](http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/what_to_see/suburban_living/katong.html). <http://www.myjoochiat.com>.

### Amoy Street and Telok Ayer Street.

One of the first Peranakan enclaves, now occupied by restaurants and offices. Many Peranakans from Malacca moved to this area as soon as the East India Company began to lease out land for sale.



**Thian Hock Keng.** The oldest Hokkien temple in Singapore was founded in 1821 although the present structure, built without nails, was completed only in 1841. The temple is dedicated to Mazu, the Daoist goddess of the sea and protector of all seamen. Many of the temple's patrons were Peranakan pioneers, such as Tan Tock Seng, who donated \$30,000 for renovations. He also founded the hospital named after him. The Hokkien Huay Kuan, a community organisation for Hokkien people in Singapore was housed at the temple and also helmed by Peranakan pioneers. *Thian Hock Keng*, 158 Telok Ayer Street, Tel: 64234616.

**Tan Si Chong Su.** Built in 1878, Tan Si Chong Su is the ancestral temple of the Tan clan, and was founded by prominent Baba philanthropists Tan Kim Ching, son of Tan Tock Seng, and Tan Beng Swee, the son of Tan Kim Seng. The first president of the temple, Tan Kim Tian, was a well-known Baba shipping tycoon. The temple consists



of shrines for the ancestral tablets of Tan clansmen, as well as altars to the clan deities. The elaborate stone and wood carvings as well as the swooping ceramic roof finials makes this one of the most elaborate Chinese temples in Singapore, quaintly located amid the gleaming towers of the financial district. *Tan Si Chong Su*, 15 Magazine Road.



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