



the peranakan

ISSUE 3 • 2011



Swee Lin & Ivan & Dick & Alvin & Glen
We Salute Our Babas and Nyonyas in Theatre!

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of Wayang
Peranakan

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Talents

The Truth
about Lye:
The GT Lye
Interview

The Main
Man:
Richard Tan
Opens Up



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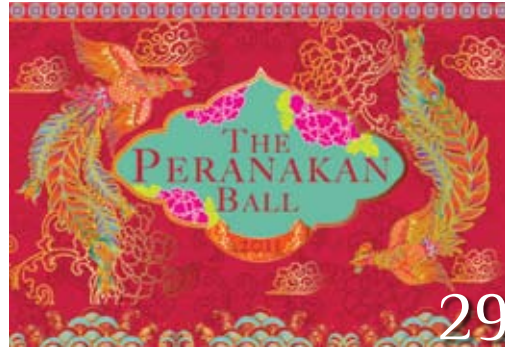
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WAYANG WONDERFUL



Photograph by Colin Chee.

Two wonderful worlds of *wayang* (theatre) take the limelight in this issue. One genre is contemporary theatre and the other, traditional *wayang Peranakan* played out in Baba Malay with a much longer history dating back to the turn of the 20th century. As shown on our cover, *The Peranakan* has much to *wayang* about. We have an exclusive on five Peranakan icons in contemporary theatre – Dick Lee, Ivan Heng, Glen Goei, Alvin Tan and Neo Swee Lin – who need no introduction. They mark the abundance of Peranakan talent on the Singapore stage, among them renowned actors such as Lim Kay Siu, Karen Tan, Tony Quek and Margaret Chan, and playwrights such as Stella Kon, Desmond Sim, Robert Yeo and Richard Tan.

To recall Kipling, whither the twain shall meet? Find out in our cover story how the two genres have crossed in some way or another for our five theatre luminaries. Hopefully, we will see a happy convergence of sorts happening more often. We also feature interviews with three leading lights in their fields – the multi-dimensional Ivan Heng, impersonator *bibik* extraordinaire GT Lye and the more experimental Richard Tan – and take delight in

a most vivid discourse by Desmond Sim on why drama runs in his blood. Drama enters *Dalam Dapor* too with much-loved recipes shared from the theatre.

Any celebration of the present must not forget the past. In the next page, we follow the twists and turns of *wayang Peranakan* history through the decades. Indulge in some trivia there as well: did you know that the 1910s had its own wannabe *bibiks* who threw jewellery to their idols, to their husbands' outrage? Or that *bangsawan* may have first been performed by the Parsis from India?

Looking back the past couple of months, I would like to mention that our community is glad to have the recognition of important members of Singapore society, including President and Mrs Nathan (with thanks to their hospitality for holding a reception specially for us at the Istana on 18 June) and Dr Tony Tan and his wife Mary who were our special guests at our Peranakan Ball 2011 on 9 July.

Finally, our congratulations to the new Sydney chapter of Peranakan associations. Welcome to the family.

LINDA CHEE, Editor

EDITOR'S NOTE

In the previous Issue 2 feature, titled "Punning, Punters and Bankers", *Chap Ji Ki* was reported to have begun in the early 20th century. Writer Baba Tan Kuning has since uncovered records to show that the gambling began more specifically in the early 1930s due in no small way to a confluence of factors. The Tanjong Pagar Railway Station, managed by KTM (Keretapi Tanah Melayu), started operating in 1932 around the same time when *Chap Ji Ki* betting was legalised by the Sultan of Johor. Bookies and punters in Singapore could board the KTM train daily and head for the gambling dens of Johor Baru to place their bets. *Chap Ji Ki* thus became an overnight craze in Singapore.

LETTERS

I heard the Peranakan Voices sing for the first time at a Peranakan-themed dinner at Serangoon Country Club on 18 March. Wow, I have not heard such wonderful voices; the songs were great, too! What's more, people get to *joget*. We've been hearing many other singers, choirs ... the Peranakan choir is a GEM! *Bagus-bagus suara mereka*, enjoy lah saya! They brought back wonderful memories for me as I recalled my late grandmother - she used to spring up with a song or two for us!

Eunice Ann Chew,
Nyonya-campur-with-Cina-Serani
Singapore

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TREADING THE BOARDS OF HISTORY

Babas Brandon Lim and Norman Cho trace the evolution of local Peranakan theatre

Before the advent of television and talking movies, theatrical performances were one of the few forms of entertainment available to Peranakans. If you think that over-zealous female fans are a contemporary phenomenon, you would be surprised to learn that the early nyonyas were quite fanatical about their theatre idols as well!

Roots of *Wayang Peranakan*

The historical beginnings of the *wayang Peranakan* are difficult to date. Although the first theatrical productions starring babas date back to the early 20th century, these plays – beginning from *A Race for a Dinner* (1904) – were staged in English and not in the Baba patois.¹ The first documented performance in the patois was probably the Straits Chinese Recreation Club's *Mustapha* (1913), which appeared to signal the genre's departure from relying on English to using Baba Malay as its medium.²

Malay *Bangsawan*

Before the Peranakans formed their own theatre groups, entertainment was provided by professional Malay actors from the *bangsawan* (Malay Opera) troupes. The most renowned was the Star Opera Company (1909 – 1927) which was owned by Peranakan brothers - KH Cheong (Cheong Koon Hong) and KS Cheong (Cheong Koon Seng) and managed by their nephew YL Tan (Tan Yew Lee). While the plays were in Malay, the stories were adapted from legends and folklore of various cultural origins including Chinese, European, Hindi, Arabian and Malay.³ Star Opera was possibly the first to translate a Chinese play into Malay - *Chu Mai Sim Fan Chye* (The Insatiable Woman) was staged on 4 March, 1910, and directed by YL Tan, under the patronage of the Subsolar Club.⁴ They staged their performances at Theatre

Royal (Star Opera Hall) in North Bridge Road.

Apart from the Peranakans, they also found the patronage of many Malay royals - the company has an advertisement declaring the Sultan of Trengganu as a patron.⁵ In 1914, they performed *Hamlet* in Malay to a mainly European audience.⁶ Their star artiste was Khairudin or Kairo Dean, also popularly known as Tairu (Tairo)⁷, who was born in Hong Kong in 1890. Tairu was synonymous with the *bangsawan*. Greatly sought after, he frequently played to full houses.⁸ Like many modern-day celebrities, he became the subject of malicious gossip among the Peranakan community! The late Madam Yeo Koon Neo (grandmother of the co-writer Norman Cho) recounted that magic charms were once suggested as the reason behind his unwavering popularity. Many nyonyas were deeply mesmerised by Tairu's dashing good looks. It was even claimed that many of them had literally thrown their jewellery onto the stage for him after each performance in deep appreciation – a diamond ring or a hurriedly unfastened *kerosang intan* (diamond brooch) being the most common items! Many outraged Babas forbade their wives from attending his shows. Khairudin reached the peak of his career around 1918. He stopped performing for the Star Opera around 1924. He

The cast of *Janda Kaya* (*The Wealthy Widow*), Great World, 1959.



Baba Christopher Lim remembers *Bangsawan* in Penang

Bangsawan in Penang was first performed by the Parsi community from Mumbai, India. Its founding father was Aboo Siti or Mamak Pushi. The cast comprised some 50 multiracial male actors including babas. Penang's prima donna of *Bangsawan* was none other than *Mak Minah* or Aminah Nani.

Later, the patois-speaking babas made headway by forming their own *wayang Peranakan* that was patronised by wealthy babas and the mercantile community. The plays focussed on domestic affairs of the 1920s to 1940s. In its heyday, these *wayangs* were staged in Kuala Kangsar Road (which was known as *Bangsawan Kay*), Maxwell Road and the New World Entertainment Centre in Swatow Lane.

then founded and starred in a very successful company called Dean's Opera also at Theatre Royal on North Bridge Road.

Another theatre troupe that was popular with the Peranakans was the Nahar Opera (1921 - 1923) which operated at Beyrouth Theatre in Geylang. This ensured a ready audience due to its close proximity to the Peranakan enclave in the Joo Chiat - Katong vicinity.

A comparison between domestic scenes in *Rusiah* (1960) and *Salah Sangka* (1990). Note the plain staging in *Rusiah* (right) and a more elaborate set in *Salah Sangka* (below).



Photographs courtesy of GSA.

Interestingly, reservation of seats to these stage productions could be done through phone booking even as early as 1918 - evident from a published advertisement by the Star Opera.⁹

Early Peranakan Dramatists

Peranakan theatrical groups first arose in the 1920s. These groups usually comprised a music ('live' band) section and a drama section. They were neither professional nor commercial and typically comprised drama enthusiasts, with productions often staged in support of charitable causes. Comedy and tragedy were the most common genres. Moral stories were often enacted. Female roles were traditionally undertaken by men as performing on stage was deemed demeaning to the nyonyas. Between each scene, there would be an intermission where the audience would be entertained with songs and skits.

The pioneer group was perhaps The United Chinese Musical Association (1920 - 1935). It performed regularly at the Star Opera Hall (North Bridge Road) and Happy Valley (Tanjong Pagar) in aid of various charities from 1922. Their plays

proved to be crowd favourites, including *Gong Kiah Sye* (The Silly Groom), *The Awakening* and *The Quarrelsome Family*.¹⁰ In 1925, they staged *Nyonya Chantek* (directed by Koh Soon Huat) which was a roaring success. This was for the benefit of the St Andrew's Hospital and the Chong Nam School building fund. KT Ann (Koh Tiong Ann) took the role of Nyonya Chantek and sang *When the Sun Goes Down* in a feminine voice to a delighted house.¹¹ Tickets were priced at \$5, \$2, \$1 & 50cts. They were also famous for their play *Chek Suanh Suay Oon* (A Squanderer's Misfortune). The melodrama revolved around the life of a gambling *towkay* who lost both his fortune and his wife and eventually committed suicide.¹² Their star actors were Lim Swee Bock, Wee Tiang Wah and Low Siak Keng. They were refreshingly funny and could impersonate numerous characters from the community. The audience simply adored them! Sadly, Lim Swee Bock died young after a terminal illness in 1928. The actor was so well

loved that the Lim Swee Bock Memorial Fund was set up in his memory.

The Merrilads Musical Association (1923 - 1948) was founded by a few enthusiastic music lovers. It was probably the most well-known and the longest surviving Peranakan dramatic association. It had 72 active members in 1932. Their first production was *Between Love and Honour* (1925) in aid of the Singapore Chinese Girls School and Chiang Tek School. Encouraged by its success, they staged *The Fortune Teller* which was produced by honorary director, Low Kway Song (who was also a respected painter). This was in aid of the Singapore and South Malaya Boy Scouts Association. Three years later, they became the first Singapore Chinese amateur musical association to perform in Penang. *The Fortune Teller* and *Between Love and Honour* were well received and raised \$5,000 for Chung Ling High School in Penang.¹³ They also supported the Honan-Shensi Relief Fund in 1929.¹⁴ The Merrilads held regular performances throughout the 1930s. *The Step-Mother* which featured an elaborate Peranakan wedding scene was performed in October 1937 at "A" Theatre, Happy World in aid of the China Relief Fund. Surprisingly, they were actively performing even towards the end of World War 2. They staged *Oo-How Put-How* in March 1945. In October 1947, they performed *Fate* at Happy World, in aid of the war widows and orphans.

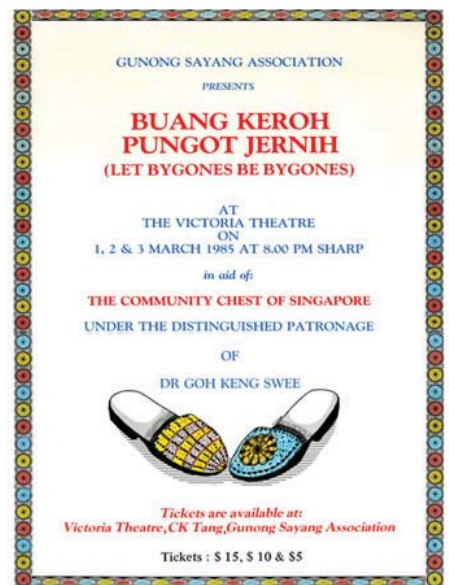
The Straits Chinese Amateur Dramatic and Musical Society (1927 - 1935) was less well-known. However, they had the patronage of Aw Boon Haw, the founder of Tiger Balm.¹⁵ They staged *The Exile Prince* in July 1931 at Moonlight Hall, New World to raise funds for the building of a Chinese temple (Tay Sun Loh Koon) in Havelock Road.¹⁶

In 1927, a novelty group called the Penang Nyonya Bangsawan was formed. They comprised an entirely female cast! In a reversal of gender roles, the nyonias took on the male roles. They staged *Jula Juli Bintang Tiga* and *The Merchant of Baghdad* at Happy Valley.¹⁷

The significance of the *wayang Peranakan's* early years, however, goes beyond it merely being

an offshoot of the 'modern' *bangsawan* tradition. There were indeed differences between the two: the *wayang* practitioners, for example, appeared to accept more readily Western theatrical elements such as proscenium staging and blocking.¹⁸ Yet beyond theatrical form, the *wayang Peranakan* also fitted into the Peranakan community's conception of itself as a domiciled local elite class which aspired to showcase their privileged social status to the rest of Singapore society.¹⁹ Through their charitable slant, the Peranakan minstrel performances not only contributed to the burgeoning social life of 1930s Singapore, but also promoted - like the *bangsawan* - a sense of social concern that cut across community lines.²⁰ The *wayang Peranakan's* auspicious dawn, however,

Programme booklets of Gunong Sayang Association (GSA) *wayangs* (clockwise from top left) Oh Chua Pek Chua (1960), Satu Darah (1958), Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih (1985) and Biji Mata Mak (1989). (Source: William Gwee, personal collection)



FEATURE

(Right): GSA productions *Sudah di-Janji* (1990) and *Salah Sangka* (1993) with the much-loved pairing of the indomitable matriarch played by Baba GT Lye and the late Nyonya Sally Gan, as the irrepressible Cantonese amah. (Photographs courtesy of GSA.)

would grind to a halt in less than a decade. The Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945 severely affected the Peranakan community and the nascent Peranakan entertainment scene. Many talented Babas who had played starring roles perished during this period, leaving behind the elderly musicians who could not shoulder the responsibilities of performing by themselves. Much like the community's privileged social status as "the natural leaders" of the Singapore Chinese, the *wayangs* were rendered anachronistic by historical developments in the post-war era.²¹ The demise of the *wayang* as a public, charitable cause perhaps also contributed to criticisms of the community's socio-political apathy that emanated particularly from prominent Straits Chinese political figures like Tan Cheng Lock and Lee Kuan Yew.²²

MEET ME AT BADMINTON HALL STAGE TONIGHT



THE NONYA is no nonya. It's William Tan, who plays the heroine Alice Wey in the play "Tidak Berdosa," which is being presented by the Kumpolan Peranakan Singapura. The show opens tonight at the Singapore Badminton Hall. Most of the programme is in Malay and all the female roles are taken by men in accordance with Singapore Baba custom. —Straits Times picture.

The late Baba William Tan in his heyday in the 1950s as a female impersonator.

During this period, groups such as the Kumpolan Peranakan Singapura, the Singapore Peranakan Amateur Dramatic Party and the Hiboran Peranakan Singapura were formed in an apparently ad-hoc manner; "they just got together and gave themselves a name", claimed William Gwee, who lived through that era.²⁴ The proceeds from each play were donated to charity, with *Satu Darah* (1958) and *Ayer Mata Ibu* (1960) raising \$8,006 and \$10,954 respectively.²⁵ Of greater significance, however, was that these *wayangs* afforded an opportunity for Peranakans to re-assert their presence in Singapore's cultural landscape. As Henry Chong, then-President of the Kumpolan Peranakan Singapura,



acknowledged, the Peranakan community had to rally against the perception that they are "fast falling into the world of 'tida apas' (people with a happy-go-lucky attitude)".²⁶ The cover images of the programme booklet on page 5, show how they emphasise the charity element in the plays.

In May 1958, Chan Teck Swee and Gwee Peng Kwee together with the Oleh-Oleh Party (an amateur Peranakan drama group) staged *The Secret* at Happy World Stadium in aid of the Fire Relief Fund for Kampong Koo Chye.²⁷

This was shortly followed by *Kehidupan Si Buta* (A Blind Girl's Fate) written by Francis Hogan, a well-known female impersonator. This play was staged at Happy World Stadium on 29 and 30 May 1958 in aid of the Red Cross Society Hospital. The highlight of the play was the Peranakan wedding scene. Genuine wedding costumes and jewellery costing several thousand dollars (extremely costly at that time) were loaned from the renowned *Sangkek Um*, Ah Bee, who was also directing the production.²⁸

Janda Kaya (The Wealthy Widow) was produced by Dr Essel Tan in 1959 to raise funds for charity. It was staged at the Garden Hall, Great World.²⁹ *Ayer Mata Ibu* (A Mother's Tears) was staged in 1960.³⁰



1960s Decline of the Wayang

This mini-revival, however, ended as abruptly as it began. The period following Singapore's attainment of self-governance in 1959 was a dark era for the Peranakans and their *wayang*. The Anglophilic and leisured lifestyle once thought to be definitive markers of 'Peranakan-ness' was now used against the community. Many Peranakans, consequently, now felt compelled to disguise their identity markers, for instance, by not wearing the *sarong kebaya* and speaking the Baba patois in public.³¹ This knock-on ramification affected the *wayang* too, and the only Peranakan stage performances that remained by the mid-1960s were the occasional birthday skit in someone's home. Other reasons for the decline of the *wayang* include the birth of modern, Western leisure activities that appealed to the young, and the death of Dr Essel Tan, who had till then been instrumental in organising the *wayang*. Younger members of the *wayang* troupes like Francis Hogan and William Tan now had to eke out a living by working, consequently neglecting their acting careers – Hogan, for example, once revealed he stopped acting after Tan's death because he "could not concentrate on his work".³²

Contemporary Efforts

The period of Singapore history between the late-1970s and the mid-1980s was especially vibrant for it witnessed a revival of public interest in all things Peranakan; once-shunned Peranakan cultural markers like the *kebaya* were then rehabilitated and endorsed for a host of reasons. The *wayang Peranakan* is no different. Whereas the art form once provided a grand and magnanimous veneer to the Peranakan identity as the 'King's Chinese' during the colonial era, by the 1980s it had become an attempt to evoke nostalgia of a bygone cultural milieu. Indeed, a point can be made that the history of the *wayang Peranakan* serves as both a narrative of cultural adaptation and a mirror of Peranakan history in Singapore.

In 1984, Felix Chia wrote and produced *Pileh Menantu* (Choosing a Daughter-In-Law) for the Singapore Arts Festival. The more stable socio-political climate of the 1980s meant the *wayang* was now much more sustainable as a theatrical endeavour. Numerous full-length performances, interspersed with shorter skits, were staged in steady succession. Ad-hoc productions include the Chinese Theatre Circle's staging of *Sam Pek Eng Tai* (a Baba Malay adaptation of the Chinese opera, *The Butterfly Lovers*; in Mandarin: 梁山伯与祝英台) in 1986, Act 3's *Tua Poh Sio Poh* (1991), and The Necessary Stage's *Mari Kita Main Wayang* (1994).

The decade between 1985 and 1995 also saw no less than nine productions by the Gunong Sayang Association (GSA). In no other era in the *wayang Peranakan*'s history has a single organisation been so dominant in the Peranakan entertainment scene. The table on page 9 provides a chronological list of the GSA *wayang Peranakan* productions from 1985.

The late Baba Felix Chia (seated) and Baba Alvin Tan who directed his play, *Mari Kita Main Wayang* in 1994. Baba Alvin is the Founder and Artistic Director of The Necessary Stage.

(Photographs on this page courtesy of The Necessary Stage.)

The nyonya cast of *Mari Kita Main Wayang*.





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GSA's full length *wayang Peranakan* from 1985 to 2010

1985 <i>Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih</i>	1999 <i>Janji Perot</i>
1986 <i>Menyesal</i>	2000 <i>Chueh-It Chap Goh</i>
1987 <i>Zaman Sekarang</i>	2001 <i>Hujan Balek ke Langgit</i>
1989 <i>Biji Mata Mak</i>	2002 <i>Anak Udang Anak Tenggara</i>
1990 <i>Tak Sangka</i>	2003 <i>Kipas Cendana</i>
1990 <i>Sudah di-Janji</i>	2004 <i>Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih</i>
1992 <i>Nasib</i>	2005 <i>Belom Mati Belom Tau</i>
1993 <i>Salah Sangka</i>	2006 <i>Mama Rosa</i>
1995 <i>Manis Manis Pait</i>	2008 <i>Mak Chim</i>
1996 <i>Kalu Jodoh Tak Mana Lari</i>	2009 <i>Ayer Pasang Ayer Surut</i>
1997 <i>Bulan Purnama</i>	2010 <i>Pagar Makan Padi</i>

In these productions, familiar names such as GT Lye and Sally Gan usually took on the lead roles. However, the issue of sustainability is a major challenge for the *wayang Peranakan* primarily because few nowadays can speak Baba patois well.

In 2005, the Main Wayang Company was founded by Richard Tan, Alvin Oon and Kelvin Tan to inject new life and innovative ideas to the Peranakan theatre scene. They produced entertaining musicals like *Bibiks Go Broadway*, *Bibiks in Parliament* and *Baba Nyonya Mari-Go Round* which appealed to a more contemporary demography.

One commendable attempt to innovate was the 2009 play *Bilek Roda Hidop* (Bedrooms), commissioned by The Peranakan Association. Creative lighting and minimal props were used. The focus was on the characters instead. It was performed in both English and Malay to reach out to a wider audience.

In these fast-changing times, *wayang Peranakan* needs to be constantly re-invented in order to engage future generations. ✨



- 1 - Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, p. 359. See also Jurgen Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 446-448 for a list of these performances.
- 2 - Song, *One Hundred Years*, p. 377.
- 3 - *Straits Times*, 1 Dec 1926, pp7; *Straits Times*, 7 Jan 1918, pp11; *Straits Times*, 17 Feb 1912, pp10
- 4 - *Straits Times*, 5 Mar 1910, pp6
- 5 - *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 23 Apr 1910, pp12
- 6 - *Straits Times*, 16 Feb 1914, pp8
- 7 - *Straits Times*, 20 Mar 1986, pp5; Felix Chia, *The Babas*, 1980, pp183
- 8 - *Straits Times*, 5 Mar 1918, pp8; *Straits Times*, 6 Sep 1918, pp7
- 9 - *Straits Times*, 24 Jan 1918, pp5
- 10 - *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 13 Jul 1925, pp8
- 11 - *Straits Times*, 14 Aug 1925, pp10
- 12 - *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 4 Dec 1926, pp18; *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 22 Apr 1927, pp9
- 13 - *Straits Times*, 24 Feb 1932, pp13
- 14 - "(Untitled)", *Singapore Free Press*, 11 July 1929, p. 8, and "Straits Chinese effort for war relief", *Straits Times*, 28 October 1937, p. 13.
- 15 - *Malayan Saturday Post*, 20 Feb 1932, pp13
- 16 - *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 30 Jul 1931, pp3
- 17 - *Straits Times*, 11 Mar 1927, pp10
- 18 - Mohamed Ghouse Nasrudin, *Teater Tradisional Melayu*, p. 93.
- 19 - C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore, 1819-2005*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), p. 160.
- 20 - Tan, *Bangsawan*, p. 32.
- 21 - R.F. Farrer, "Renew youth call to SCBA", *SCBA Golden Jubilee souvenir 1950*, p. 27.
- 22 - Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, pp. 173-186 provides numerous examples of these criticisms.
- 23 - *Straits Times*, 16 Nov 1957, pp7
- 24 - William Gwee, OHC interview. Accession number 002136, reel 7.
- 25 - "Paid \$8,006 to see 'Satu Darah'", *Singapore Free Press*, 18 October 1958, p. 7, and "Ayer Mata Ibu netted \$10,954", *Straits Times*, 17 September 1960, p. 4.
- 26 - Henry Chong, "A Message to All Peranakans", *Tidak Berdosa* programme booklet, 1957.
- 27 - *Straits Times*, 6 May 1958, pp5
- 28 - *The Singapore Free Press*, 2 May 1958, pp5
- 29 - *Straits Times*, 14 Mar 1959, pp2
- 30 - *The Singapore Free Press*, 16 Jul 1960, pp5
- 31 - Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, p. 189.
- 32 - Francis Hogan, Oral History Centre interview. Accession number 002708, reel 5.


GSA staged *Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih* in 2004. (Photograph courtesy of GSA.)

 **DICK LEE**

Multi-talented Dick Lee needs no introduction. He writes, composes, arranges music, performs, hosts, directs and produces musicals and plays, designs clothing and jewellery. Most renowned for infusing pop music with Asian elements, Dick's landmark album, *The Mad Chinaman*, also tackled issues of identity and culture. Peranakans especially cherish his interpretation of *Bunga Sayang*, from the 1994 musical *Kampung Amber*.

 **IVAN HENG**

Ivan is the founding Artistic Director of W!ld Rice, and is most well remembered for his portrayal of *Emily of Emerald Hill*. A true blue son of Singapore, he decided to return to his birth country in 1998 to make theatre that was closer to his heart and home. He has produced, directed and starred in numerous productions for film, television, radio and of course, theatre. In 2009, he served as Creative Director for the National Day Parade.

 **NEO SWEE LIN**

Swee Lin's unassailable maternal air has served her well: she's widely recognised as Ah Ma from the sitcom *Phua Chu Kang*. She readily admits being cast most often in motherly roles, and has played *Emily of Emerald Hill*. More recently, she acted as a conflicted mother in *Nadirah* (winning Best Supporting Actress in The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards 2010) and as a loving grandmother in Desmond Sim's *Postcards from Rosa*.

FEATURE

DRAMA BABAS (AND NYONYA!), TAKE A BOW

Nyonya Linda Chee is moved by this rare gathering of Singapore theatre icons

ALVIN TAN

The Founder and Artistic Director of The Necessary Stage (TNS), Alvin Tan has been championing and defining the local theatre scene for almost 25 years. A proud Peranakan, he has lived around Katong practically his entire life. Alvin has directed almost 50 plays, including *Bedrooms for The Peranakan Association*. He has been awarded a Fulbright Scholarship and the National Arts Council's Young Artist Award.

GLEN GOEI

Glen is one of Singapore's leading film and theatre directors. He is the Associate Artistic Director of W!ld Rice. Glen received the National Youth Award in 1994, and served as Creative Director for the National Day Parade from 2003-6. Recently, Glen directed Ivan Heng in a reprise of *Emily of Emerald Hill*. His 2009 film, *The Blue Mansion*, was notable for depicting of the contemporary lifestyle of a wealthy Straits Chinese family.

This is the first time these famous five Peranakan theatre practitioners have been photographed in a single frame.
Photograph by Chris Yap.

FEATURE

It was an occasion theatre lovers would die for. *The Peranakan* magazine scored a coup by bringing together in a single frame, five luminaries of contemporary Singapore theatre who, *ahem*, so happen to be Peranakans.

The seed of this historic moment for the magazine was the flurry of theatre performances at the start of the year and the many more shows coming up. It sparked an idea that had been incubating for months - why not feature Peranakans in theatre as our next cover theme? With every play that hit town, we could spot at least a Peranakan or two, or three onstage. But it was not any easy task to choose just a few from the rich pool of talent in the community. We would have to choose carefully.

The magazine committee debated and decided to go democratic: list the Peranakans who were most prominent in Singapore theatre and throw open the choice through an online poll on facebook. The resulting Top Five, after a fortnight of polling, were Babas Dick Lee, Ivan Heng, Glen Goei, Alvin Tan and Nyonya Neo Swee Lin, in that order. When told, all were thrilled that they were the Peranakan favourites in theatre.

Time was fortuitous for us. By some miracle, all five of these very busy artistes were available to join us at Sunday tea to shoot the cover photo. We were also extremely fortunate that the photographer Chris Yap had kindly volunteered to create our cover image. Our Peranakan Association Life President, Uncle Kip, and his wife Auntie Liz, were ever gracious in opening their living room for the photography session.

The atmosphere was most convivial and easygoing as they streamed in one by one and started chatting with all and sundry. Happily, it was the first time they were all together at one sitting.

Baba Dick Lee, *Singer, Composer and Founder-Creative Director, Fantastic Entertainment*

“I’m delighted to be reminded that I’m a Peranakan artiste and proud to be both a Peranakan and an artiste. My Peranakan culture is something I have always known, and perhaps taken for granted. Because of this certainty, I believe that everything I have created has been created as a Peranakan. There is a spirit of that in my work, which is sometimes hard to pinpoint, but sometimes proudly on display.”

Baba Ivan Heng, *Actor and Artistic Director, Wild Rice*

“In this day and age, very few can claim to be ‘true blue’ Peranakans. But this narrow definition doesn’t make sense as we are in fact a hybrid of cultures. So what is a “true” Peranakan? If we only allow for ‘pure’ Peranakans, then hardly anyone will qualify. This exclusiveness will put people off from embracing the culture, or scare them away. And the culture will die. Like every culture, being Peranakan is in how one expresses it - whether it be in the way we speak or dress, the songs we sing and the food we cook and eat. One is as Peranakan as one feels, chooses to celebrate it or claims to be.”

Growing Up Peranakan

The indelible memories and stories of growing up Peranakan came fast and furious. Dick, who had just finished conducting his music class, remembered: “I was brought up surrounded by all things Peranakan and have never questioned it. It’s like knowing I am Catholic - simply something I know and believe in.”

“The memory of visiting relatives during Chinese New Year when I was a child is the most vividly Peranakan recollection I have, and the closest I have been to my heritage. The charming and often eccentric bibiks, reigning in their Katong homes remains an indelible vision,” Dick laughed.

Ivan’s immediate recall was of eating with the womenfolk. “I lived in a family in which all the men will eat first. Then all the women will sit down, that’s when they *ronggeng*, talk., gossip! As a child I ate with the women. I learnt to eat fish head because the women were left with the carcasses.”

Alvin was raised in the East Coast, stronghold of the Peranakans, and remains a true Katong boy. His moments of feeling “most Peranakan was when my grandparents were alive as I had to converse with them in the patois.” He feels at home when he is conversing with his parents and Malay friends “and when I’m eating delicious Peranakan food. It’s definitely the noises of children playing and mothers reminding them to clean up to get ready for dinner during a reunion dinner, and the noises in the kitchen when my grandmother’s sister is instructing the servants on the cooking.”

The heady aroma of *rempah tumis*, *buah keluak*, *hati babi*, *heepioh* soup on the stove all add up. “And of course, having to *soja* (pray) at the altar to pay our respects to our ancestors before we partake of the huge family dinner,” he reminisced.

Baba Glen Goei, *Actor-Director*

“Nowadays everything is very superficial and skin deep. In our culture we pay great attention to the finer details which adds to the complete picture; I always apply that in my work. There is much pride in the clothes we wear, how we look, how we talk, our food. We take pride in our culture. It’s very important in this age when everything becomes homogenous. We ‘suffer’ for our culture as we are perfectionists because if we don’t do it, we will become like everyone else. Then our culture will disappear.”

The East Coast was also Swee Lin’s childhood home. Her happiest memory was of the heavy rain pouring down on her rent-control home on stilts at Joo Chiat Place, opposite St Mark’s Hospital (now Eastshore Hospital): “The waters would fill up and flood the road and we would stand on the veranda, floating our paper boats along!”

Glen is the typical Peranakan too when it comes to food, “which was a big thing in our family. Secondly the love of music, theatre and art is very much in our bloodline. That’s most definitely Peranakan.” Coming from a large family of seven children, “all my brothers and sisters were involved in theatre and drama, and my grandparents loved music and drama. They encouraged us to go onstage.”

Peranakans and Theatre: Kindred Spirits

Ivan shared a similar childhood as Glen. He said with a flourish, “There are so many

Baba Alvin Tan, *Founder-Artistic Director, The Necessary Stage*

“I am proud of my Peranakan heritage because of how unique it is due to the cross-cultural pollination taking place over time. I think it’s something the world today can draw inspiration from. Being Peranakan is about the curiosity of other cultures and the love for innovation. I believe how much I relish and thrive on improvisations, and explorations in my theatre work, come from my Peranakan blood.”

Peranakans in theatre because from a very young age we were told to sing and dance, and play the piano for grandma!”

Being Peranakan also “most definitely” influenced Alvin’s theatrical bent. “It has made me more open to intercultural stories and themes. Anything that is not pure, or rather whenever there is an interaction of different cultures, I tend to be interested. I love the dialogue between diverse sensibilities, making possible new entities or conversations.” True to that, Alvin is currently hard at work on a collaborative piece with a Croatian theatre company, tentatively titled *Cro-Sing* which is short for Croatia and Singapore. Its premiere is slated for July 2012 in Rijeka and August in Singapore. Do watch for it!

For actress Swee Lin, she can’t help but live and breathe Peranakan-ness in a lot of her work. She

Nyonya Neo Swee Lin, *Actor*

“Two years ago, I made my Malay theatre debut in *Nadirah* by Alfian Sa’at for which I got my first Life! Theatre Award for Best Supporting Actress, playing a Peranakan woman who converted to Islam. I guess it helped being able to speak the language. *Nadirah* is being restaged by Wild Rice this year, come lah and support!”

has played Peranakan women in numerous roles, including the Alfian Sa’at play *Nadirah*, and in the monologues *Emily of Emerald Hill* and *Postcards from Rosa*.

For Dick, Peranakan-ness is something he has internalised, “There is a Peranakan sensibility in my work, which is sometimes hard to pinpoint, but sometimes proudly on display.” The song *I am Baba* from his *Mad Chinaman* album immediately come to mind.

Agreeing, Glen says his works bear an “East-West sensibility... (I can) stage a Western play, but with an Asian flavour and understanding.” He also believes that the particular nature of Peranakans means they are perfectionists. This attention to detail makes him “suffer” for his art “because if we don’t do it, we will become like everyone else. Then our culture will disappear.”

While suffering for one’s culture is thus crucial, Peranakans also happily find every excuse to *joget* and have a good time. Take a bow, babas and nyonias! ✨

To find out what Chris Yap thought of the photo session, visit www.peranakan.org.sg.

ENGAGING IVAN

Baba Emeric Lau is granted the privilege of a one-on-one interview with Ivan Heng

“It was interesting that your magazine’s review (*Issue 2, 2011*) mentioned that I said ‘sh*t’ during the second night performance of *Emily*.” Ivan Heng is tilting his head slightly at the recollection. “Yes,” I replied, “I was the reviewer...” “Oh, it was YOU,” he exclaims, eyes lighting up. “I must explain...” As it turned out, the elevated platform on which he was standing had started to descend prematurely, causing him to lose his balance in the dark. He was left clinging perilously to an upper stairway landing, decked in high-heeled shoes and a massive ball gown. Fortunately, he was able to pull himself up, uninjured and before the lights came on, and then immediately assume the poise needed for the party scene that followed. It was just a small incident in the eventful life of one of Singapore’s eminent theatre practitioners, and *The Peranakan* is glad to publish this clarification.

Parents would bring their daughters up to him and say, “You must learn how to be a proper lady from Uncle Ivan!”

In an interview that stretched for almost an hour, Ivan recalled his experience growing up in a Peranakan family. He reflected, “I was given a magic set one year, and so I started performing magic. They would pass the hat and collect some money and I was led to believe that you can make a lot of money being an actor...boy, how wrong I was!” he laughs. It was also perfectly natural for family members to partner up for dances: husbands and wives, siblings, parents and children, and so he decided to make *Emily* dance with her son, Richard, as she exits at the end of the play.

Indeed, it was very much a matter of drawing from his memories of growing up when it came to creating *Emily*: “I’ve been fortunate to have all these fantastic women in my life.” Ivan shared that the nyonys in his family live life with a passion – they are raucous, bold and powerful in their sexy voile kebayas. He drew from their manner of moving, gesturing and verbalising in creating his *Emily*. This certainly struck a chord with the audience as he received full standing ovations every night. “I was profoundly moved...humbled,

just to have had this opportunity to be welcomed as one (with the audience).”

“It is very important to connect intimately in theatre,” Ivan observed. “We have five senses, of which I especially exploited touch and smell.” He shared that he made it a point to touch people in the segments where he interacts up close with the audience, such as during the intermission where he enacts *Emily* shopping at the wet market in the theatre foyer. “People remember when they get touched even lightly on the shoulder. It is a very powerful thing. I have folks come up to me and say ‘Do you know, you turned me into Mrs Schneider in your show!’” Ivan also wanted to transport the audience back in time “...and smell is really the key to unlocking that sense. I went to source and spritz myself all over with the Estee Lauder perfume my grandmother used. It was Youth Dew. You just have to catch a whiff, and it instantly unlocks childhood memories of the older womenfolk...”

He also chuckles at how parents would bring their daughters up to him and say, “You must learn how to be a proper lady from Uncle Ivan!” *Emily* is really a woman of the 1950s, so her mannerisms would certainly strike one as more “ladylike” than women of today. “It’s also a whole lot of hair, make-up and of course, the costumes that help in my transformation...I drop my shoulders a little, sit with my ankles pulled back and slightly crossed.” Ivan also lost 9kg to appear svelte. “You just starve, don’t eat!” He says matter-of-factly. “It’s an equation, right? Just expend more than the input and you take off the weight.”

Turning serious, Ivan shared that he valued being able to serve his own community as a Singaporean artiste. He proudly listed his involvement in the National Day Parade (NDP) 2009 and the opening and closing ceremonies of the Youth Olympic Games. “I conceived and directed NDP 2009 as Creative Director. It was important for me to feature the Peranakan community - and many will remember Francis Hogan taking centre stage as a *bibik*. This was the very first time in the history of NDP that the community was featured as an intrinsic part of the main show. Previously, the Peranakans were always featured in the untelevised pre-show warm ups, which was a shame.

“And it is the same spirit that motivates me to do *Emily*...I think about theatre as communion. Everyone arrives as strangers to see a show, but when they leave, they leave as an audience.” ❖

Watch highlights from Ivan’s interview on video at our website www.peranakan.org.sg.



Photograph courtesy of Wild Rice.

BABA-DRAMA

Playwright Baba Desmond Sim explains his inclination

When people ask me how I got into drama, I always tell them that I grew up in an extended Peranakan family home. They usually laugh and think I am joking. But it is no joke. Growing up in a Peranakan extended family can turn you into a dramatist – before you even realise it!

Okay, here are the *dramatis personae* (list of characters) in my extended family... my *sin-keh* father married my *nyonya* mother and moved into her parents' home (not uncommon among Baba families) - which also included two uncles, three aunts, my two siblings, two servants, two dogs, a giant cage full of birds, and two tanks full of breeding Oscars. You can imagine the chaos every morning in the shophouse we lived in - given that there was only one toilet and one bathroom! Everyone was always fighting to use one or the other, and spotting one family member banging on the aluminium door hurrying the user in the squat toilet cubicle was quite a common sight in the morning.

But somehow, everybody got done what they needed to do, and we would be settling ourselves at the big breakfast table to chow down when suddenly Granny would barge into the kitchen with an urgent query: "Who pooped that HUGE piece of poop in the toilet today? I have never seen such a large piece of poop before!" You see, this was in the 1960s before flush toilets were common, and the bucket system was still in use. So, each of our morning contributions were flagrantly exposed to family scrutiny. Despite protests that we were still eating, and could she please hold the Spanish Inquisition till after our half boiled eggs were consumed, Granny would remain as adamant as Ms Marple was in an Agatha mystery to get to the ...uh... bottom of things.

And so, the inquisition proceeded with the seriousness of a ...um... whodunit investigation. We were each made to recount who went into the loo before whom, and it was a matter of time before we deduced that it was my reluctant and highly embarrassed younger uncle who did the do-do. So much drama, and the day had hardly begun!

And then there were the lizards. How are lizards dramatic, you ask? Well, they can be pretty dramatic when they occasionally fall into the bed of three young and single aunts. The havoc that ensued and the frantic dance they did on the bed was almost as funny as the time our maid took the trash out, and

a lizard darted up her arm and ended up inside her brassiere. That was another exotic dance that is burned in my

memory. I kid you not. I use the word "burn" literally, as the aforementioned lizard-in-the-brassiere dance happened on the eve of Mid-Autumn Festival, when I was taking my lantern out for a "test run". I was laughing so hard at my maid trying to shake the lizard out from her blouse that my lantern caught fire!

As soon as she got the offending reptile away from her outraged bosom, my maid rushed over to the garden hose and doused my happily blazing lantern. I was of course screaming in terror and crying in disappointment that my beautiful clamshell and

“The Peranakan home is a veritable canvas of drama. That is why most Peranakan plays centre around the living room of a home.”

baby (there was actually a doll in the clamshell) had ended up a skeleton of baked clam and with a lump of melted plastic baby. By then, of course, the entire household plus a gaggle of *kaypoh* neighbours had gathered to watch the spectacle. If I chose to recreate this scene in one of my movies or play scripts today, some critic would probably label it over-dramatic and would not believe that these things happen in real families. Well, that critic would probably not be Peranakan, *lah*.

Indeed, the Peranakan home is a veritable canvas of drama. That is why most Peranakan plays centre around the living room of a home. It is in the living room that my uncle and his rock and roll band played to afternoon tea dances – chaperoned by eagle-eyed adults watching out for any serious hanky panky. At five years old, I simply sat in the corner with my bottle of Green Spot, wondering how I might sneak another bottle in before dinner time.

The Peranakan home would also be the centre of all secrets and gossip. My granny had a secret place for the money she managed to scrimp from her housekeeping allowance – and stash away for a rainy day. It was in a lace handkerchief, rolled up in exercisebook paper, put into a small earthen



Desmond, who is also a renowned Peranakan painter, grew up in an extended family.

FEATURE

pot, placed in a disused aluminium stewing pot, sequestered at the far end of a cupboard where the pots and pans were kept. It was a measure of my granny's love and trust that I was the only one who was shown where the stash was. And I kept the secret with the seriousness of an agent in a James Bond movie. Nobody ever found out I knew where the stash was... till now. Oops.

It was also in our extended family home where my grandfather fell from a ledge (feeding his beloved budgerigars) and fell into a coma for days - sending the whole family into panic mode. Even more drama! In that same house, we grieved over my eldest uncle's untimely death on a motorbike. There were periodic spontaneous outbursts of tears for a year following that funeral. At another time, my younger brother knocked himself out by hitting his head when he succeeded in opening a stuck drawer. On another occasion, the same brother knocked our younger sister off a clothes' line bracket and she cut her chin on a rusty stool. Each one of these, again, involved everyone in the family - and a full cast of neighbours. The drama was unending.

Of course, it was not all bad. Every new pet - dog, cat, chicken, duckling, fish - would be a cause for a celebration. In fact, we Peranakans find any and every reason to celebrate! Birthdays, births, baptisms, weddings, anniversaries, church feast days, baby's first month, doing well in exams, going away, homecomings - we will happily plan a party at the drop of a hat. Even when there is no reason, we can always make up one as an excuse to cook a meal and get everyone together. Our social calendars are often as full as our lives with our families. I once wrote a play dedicated to my granny called *Postcards from Rosa*. In this play, Rosa likened each memory to a patch on her quilt. It seems that our conjoined lives as a Peranakan family comprises one amazing, colourful, gigantic quilt.

So it comes as no surprise that I write drama today. Where others grapple for inspiration, I am fortunate enough to be able to reach into the recesses of my childhood and my younger years to pick out random memories which often pass off as "drama". As they often say, "truth is stranger than fiction". But in the case of my life in our Baba family, truth is often more drama than fiction. ❖

With me are riches and honor, enduring wealth and prosperity. My fruit is better than fine gold; what I yield surpasses choice silver. I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, bestowing wealth on those who love me and making their treasuries full. Proverbs 8:18-21



Timeless Treasure

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THE INIMITABLE MATRIARCH OF SINGAPORE

Baba GT Lye has played to full houses as the matriarch *par excellence* in numerous *wayang Peranakan* since the mid-80s. Audiences of many races have been moved to tears by his pithy and poignant performances. The doyen of the Peranakan stage recollects the grand moments of *wayang* in a behind-the-curtains interview with Baba Colin Chee

Baba GT, how and when did you start as an actor in Peranakan plays?

It all started after I joined Gunong Sayang Association (GSA) in the early 1970s. I was 40 plus then. At that time Singapore had not had a *wayang Peranakan* (Peranakan theatre) for many years, since the 50s. So I suggested to William Tan, who was then in the GSA management committee, that we should have one. He was completely not happy about it. But I was stubborn and kept on suggesting. William said it was not easy to do and got very angry because I was very persistent.

What happened after that?

In 1984 Felix Chia wrote the play *Pilih Menantu* (Choosing a Daughter-in-Law). The President of GSA then was Quek Choon Juan. GSA decided to produce the play so I auditioned for the role of the father and Madam Wee Leck Neo auditioned for the role of the matriarch. Choon Juan could see that the *wayang* was a moneymaking enterprise. He was right. The show was a sell-out. It played every night to a full house for four nights at the Fort Canning Drama Centre. The director was Cecilia Ong.

Was there any follow-up?

The next year, 1985, GSA decided to do another show. I was invited to join the show committee. They started to look for someone to play the matriarch again. But they could not find someone suitable. As I was in the showcom, I opened my mouth and said, "Since you can't find one I will volunteer and oblige to be the matriarch." Everybody was not happy because GT had never been a matriarch before. I had never cross-dressed before. Also, in 1985 many of the committee members doubted cross-dressing would be appreciated. They gave all kinds of reasons but I said "no,no,no,no." I finally said: "Okay, if you don't want me as the matriarch it is all right."

Why the resistance to cross-dressing?

To be fair, in the 1980s nobody ever thought of cross-dressing. In GSA's 1984 show, *Pilih Menantu*,

the ladies played ladies' roles and the men played men's roles. But up to the early 1950s, only men played ladies' roles. Ladies were not to be seen on stage because that would be quite embarrassing. In the 1950s, GSA had never put up any show. The *wayangs* were usually produced by 'mushroom' entertainment enterprises like Peranakan Singapura. But more often they did it for charity.

In those days too when a certain group made money, other groups opened their eyes and also tried to do the same. A few groups popped up and some went bankrupt to the extent that the bosses couldn't pay their suppliers. One producer offered to give up his baby to his creditors. Of course nobody took the baby. Just drama. Groups needed luck to make it. The *wayangs* were usually played in Happy World and Badminton Hall, and sometimes in other small halls.

Coming back to the 1985 show, what happened after all the disagreement to you becoming the matriarch?

GSA President Choon Juan, after watching me in 1984, felt I could make it. Although all the others were against it, as President he said he had the last say and insisted I take on the role of the matriarch. I did not want my real name to be known. So I used my initials for the first time - GT Lye. This was how GT Lye became my stage name. Those within the circle knew who GT Lye was. Those outside never knew.



Baba GT Lye's performances have been based on true-to-life experiences growing up in a totally Peranakan environment.

What was it like to be the first man in a long time to play the role of a matriarch?

The first time I played the role it was very difficult to get people to do the *baju panjang*. It was difficult to find authentic jewellery. Nobody was prepared to lend their heirlooms. You could not find replicas so easy like today. Now replicas look so genuine. At the time too only two or three people were able to do the *nyonya* hair. There were very few *nyonys* left wearing *baju panjang* and *sanggol nyonya* in 1985.

I wore a wig because I had a lot of hair then. My hair was luscious. There was no problem. But by and by, my hair started thinning. It became uncomfortable to wear a wig and I asked an old lady to do my hair. It was very difficult to do myself. When the old lady passed on, the next person to do the *sanggol nyonya* for me was a Melaka

gentleman who lived in Singapore, Mr Lee Yoke Poh. But he felt he was not good enough so he forced me to learn from him. I finally managed to do the *sanggol nyonya* properly, to the point where I could teach others. I am glad to have taught Thomas Tan of Malacca and he can do it very well now. The other person I taught is my hairdresser. But she is stubborn. She doesn't want to follow our way

but the easy way. So it's not a proper job. She gets away with her style because people don't know the intricacies of the *sanggol nyonya*.

How were you first introduced to the public as a matriarch?

When we went to the press preview at Paramount Hotel before the show, everybody was shocked. I walked in and for the first time in my life I was dressed as a matriarch. Those people who didn't know me thought I was an old woman. They had never seen me before in this attire. I was introduced as an impersonator. It was very hard for them to believe I was a man. I made myself prim and proper and behaved to the fullest as a matriarch.

I had told myself before I dressed: "The only way to escape from people gossiping and talking about me is to make them forget I am a man. Cheat them. Fool them." This was in 1985. The show was titled *Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih* or *Let Bygones Be Bygones*. There was a big review in the newspapers.

It was fantastically good and the show played to full houses in Victoria Theatre. This 1985 show lasted two and a half hours and played for five nights.

Where did GSA go from here, after this watershed 1985 play?

GSA staged one new show every year. The shows were so popular they were sold out all the time for many years. Many elderly people were very happy they got the chance to see *wayang Peranakan* again after so many years. Other communities like the Malays and Eurasians would also come to the shows.

Whenever I performed I would watch the audience. There were Sikhs, Arabs and Malay families. Even on the eve of *Hari Raya Haji* Malay families would sacrifice the time to come. Every year I would see the same people - whole families. They would book one long front row just to watch the shows. Those days you could really feel they craved and loved the shows.

After one show, in the lift, there was one very old lady who was carried by her son on his back. She said: "GT, I am so happy I never miss your shows. If ever I were to collapse, fall and die in this theatre I would die happy because I love your shows." Later, I met her at Katong Antique House. There were so many other old ladies who became my close friends. They would invite me to their homes for *popiah*.

Sometimes I would be hired to do short skits as free public performances in Sentosa. The *bibiks* would come five or six hours before the shows to *chope* (reserve) the seats and tie raffia strings around the front row seats. The pleasure and happiness were watching and knowing I have made these old ladies happy. And I know them and their families know me.

It looks like after many years of performing on stage, many people now recognise you?

Many a time I came across Malays who ask me: "Why are you not doing shows anymore? It's a waste. And saying, *kita semua suka* (we love them)."

I can never ever forget one incident. I was coming back from Malacca and at the bus stop, a Malay lady kept staring at me. It is common for people to stare at me. Because I know they must have seen my shows. She asked, "Are you the one in the Peranakan show?", and I said yes. Then she hugged and kissed me and cried. I asked: "Why are you so emotional?" She said: "You know I have never been to your live performances but I watched your show *Menyesal* (Regrets) on TV". *Menyesal* was one of those shows I did that was aired on TV and repeated a couple of times on the Malay TV channel and they loved it. The Malay lady said, "I am staying with my only son and daughter-in-law. I was very unhappy there



GT in the 2009 show, *Bedrooms*, staged by The Peranakan Association Singapore.

CHAKAP CHAKAP

because my daughter-in-law never treated me well. She never wanted to talk to me. That night I was watching *Menyesal* on TV and was sitting at the back of the room and my daughter-in-law was sitting in front of my feet." *Menyesal* is a very sad story about an unfilial daughter-in-law who was very rude to her mother-in-law and later on there was retribution. Her daughter-in-law was so touched, she turned around towards her mother-in-law and kissed her and begged for forgiveness. That was how her daughter-in-law turned over a new leaf. So this lady cried and cried because of *Menyesal*. That's why it was one incident I would never ever forget.

What sort of acting training did you get for your roles?

I never ever got any training. I never asked people for help. It may be because as far as I can remember my early childhood days were spent with a typical nyonya who was extremely poor but who had many nyonya friends. They always visited one another and my foster mother would bring me wherever she went. So since the age of maybe five, even before going to school, I had met many Peranakan ladies. These ladies were just fantastic in their behaviour. One would vary from the other.

By the time I returned home to my own parents, we did all the Peranakan ancestral worship rites and I learned a lot. Every year, when my father celebrated his birthday we would have *cherki* sessions in our house. All the nyonias would come to the house and would play *cherki* before lunch.

Most of them would wear typical nyonya attire with *baju panjang* and *sanggol nyonya*. In those days the way they delivered the language, the way they behaved, the way they sat and the way they talked we will never ever see again. Present day Peranakans don't talk like Peranakans of those days. This was my basic training. It is all in me without being taught. So when I play the matriarch role, it is just in me. I don't need to learn. This is the benefit for being brought up in a totally authentic Peranakan environment.

After me many other men started cross-dressing. But they have not reached the standard that I have set because maybe they have not seen and experienced the real matriarchs of old. Instead, they learnt by watching me. In every community there are the good and the bad matriarchs. So what I enacted on stage would be as true to life as possible. In the 1950s, there were many old matriarchs in Singapore. It was dangerous to do roles of matriarchs. The old matriarchs would never accept or take to these roles on stage. So producers would instead concentrate on story lines about young heroines and get beautiful men to cross dress in these roles. Often

the matriarchs would fall in love with these men and would shower the beautiful actors with gifts. By the time I played the role of matriarchs in the 1980s, there were few of them left. So there was less concern about creating and acting out matriarch roles on stage.

What are some of the more interesting and memorable plays that you have acted in?

Let Bygones Be Bygones was replayed for many years after I stopped acting the part. For 10 to 12 years. The playwright Henry Tan was still alive. He had written many plays for GSA. After eight years they wanted him to rewrite the story as the original plot was a bit thin. In the early years thin plots were okay. But as the audience got more sophisticated they wanted more. He declined and insisted that I revamp the story. I composed two new songs for the show, revamped the plot and created new characters. The new show was done in 2003 and 2004. I was the matriarch.

To me the role I found most challenging and enjoyable was in the play *Bijik Mata Mak* (Apple of the Mother's Eye.) It was very emotional. I cried my

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CHAKAP CHAKAP



GT gives another memorable performance as the dying mother in Bedrooms.

heart out on stage and my cast shed genuine tears. The story is about a mother's pet. How an adopted son became unfilial and deserted his adoptive mother. She went to Kuala Lumpur to find him but fainted. She was found by a rich Peranakan girl who pitied her and took her home. The girl did not

know that her husband was the lady's adopted son. Next morning when the old lady served breakfast her adopted son still refused to acknowledge her. She cried until she became blind. Retribution: the son was kicked out by his wife because he was useless. When he returned to Singapore to look for his foster mother, she was in an old folks' home. He overheard her telling her tragic story, and realised how much she loved him. He begged her for forgiveness. The actor who played the role cried genuine tears. At the end of the play I asked him how he managed to cry. He said when he saw me in the wheelchair on stage I reminded him of his grandmother.

In those days I always ad-libbed a lot, especially when scripts were not written by me. I improved the dialogue.

My last show was *Bedrooms*. It played in 2009. Many people said that was my best show. But that was my worst because I had a hard time doing certain scenes. When the time came for me to die in bed you can never imagine how happy I was! I was always looking forward to die faster, lah. That bedroom scene, ah, it was so dramatic. Many people said it was what carried the play.

I just want to act. ✽

Rumah



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A CULTURE PROFESSIONALISED

Peranakan culture appears to have enjoyed a resurgence in recent years, particularly after the astounding success of television blockbuster *The Little Nyonya*. One wholly commercial enterprise that is actively professionalizing the culture, so to speak, is The Main Wayang Company, which has woven for itself a busy cultural calendar of local and overseas engagements. Baba Colin Chee asks Creative Director and Co-Founder Baba Richard Tan about the challenges of merchandising Peranakan culture to all and sundry

When and how did you get started in drama – whether acting in plays or producing and directing?

My interest in drama and acting started as a child of the 1960s. My late grandmother brought me to the Singapore Badminton Hall to watch a *wayang Peranakan*. I was fascinated by the interactive banter of actors onstage and with their audiences. I liked that the actors poked fun at one another and teased the audience. It was also the first time that I saw babas cross-dressing. I was thrilled!

When I was older, grandma would always bring me to the movies. I was deeply influenced by the musicals of Rodgers & Hammerstein and others. I loved *The Sound of Music*, *Flower Drum Song*, *The King and I* and *West Side Story*. I admired Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, Doris Day. Not surprisingly I took up ballet after school, performed for numerous SYF (Singapore Youth Festivals) and years later, became a full-time Music & Drama Company (MDC) show-trouper in the Singapore Armed Forces during my National service (NS). After NS, I was offered a musical theatre scholarship to study in the Philippines from 1980 to 1983. I returned to take up the position of Choreographer with MDC from 1984 to 1998. I also studied musical theatre in New York in 1985.

After this stint, what did you do?

I worked with STAR's (Singapore Theatre & American Repertory, now known as SRT), choreographing and directing musical theatre shows, then for television and corporate events. That was when I started to rediscover my Peranakan roots.

In the late 1980s I was invited to groom and train a small pool of actors and dancers from Gunong Sayang Association (GSA). This led to directing four of their *wayang Peranakan* and a Chingay Parade. I was then invited to become the Cultural Development Director of The Peranakan Association. This was where I founded the Peranakan Voices choir and groomed volunteers to stage a full-length musical comedy, *Bibiks Behind Bars*, in 2002.

In 2004, I moved on to start my own cultural arts

and contemporary Peranakan theatre company, The Main Wayang Company. It was and still is meant to spearhead a whole new innovative way of embracing our Peranakan heritage for the youth of today and to help explore the evolution of our Peranakan culture by taking risks with new communication technologies and new perspectives of our culture.

Do you think you act better or are you more proficient in producing, directing, or strategising and executing the direction of Peranakan drama?

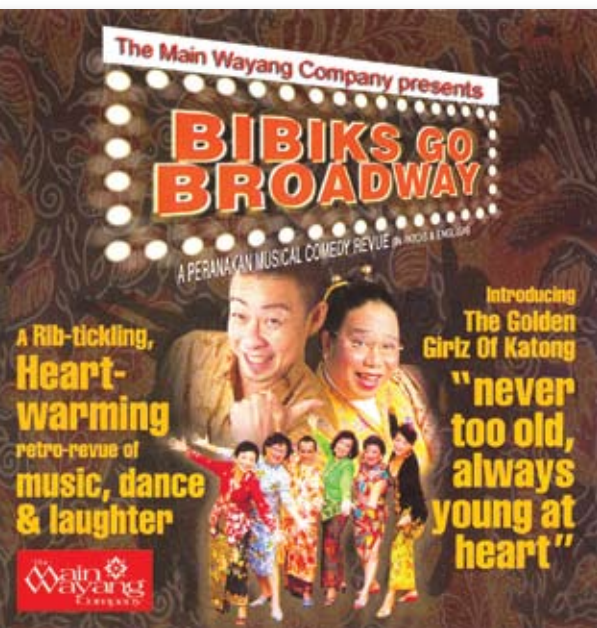
I would say that my strength lies in training and grooming new talents, choreographing, scripting, and directing. Now, increasingly, I am a producer.

What do you think was good about Peranakan drama in the past 20 years?

Most of the past *wayang Peranakan* themes were centered on matriarchal figures, family domestics, love and marriage. They retained the nostalgic essence of our Peranakan way of life back then. From ceremonial customs, festive rituals and rites, to enriching family values like ancestral worship, filial piety, they reminded us of a treasured heritage that is fast disappearing as our ever-changing lifestyle today moves inexorably towards more liberal and modern social norms and style preferences. But at the same time, in a small way, there is a slow but steady revival and interest in *wayang Peranakan* not only among the true-blue Peranakans and our older generation. We are also noticing a keen although nascent interest amongst our young and even among non-Peranakans. We need to keep their interest engaged, keep it going and growing.



Baba Richard Tan, Creative Director and Co-Founder of The Main Wayang Company. (All photographs courtesy of The Main Wayang Company.)



(Above and right) Publicity posters for the Bibik series of shows, "Bibiks Go Broadway!" (2003) and "Bibiks in Parliament!" (2005).

What do you think was lacking then?

I don't see any lack here. The *wayang Peranakan* of an era gone by were aptly relevant; their witty improvisations were quick and spontaneous, with their campy characters and "larger-than-life" roles. It was what a "people's theatre" was all about. They reflected the performing arts of their time. These show-qualities and show themes now

appear out-dated and archaic to today's theatre-goers.

Is this what drove you to set up your own drama entertainment Peranakan company, The Main Wayang? How viable is it now?

For some time I was getting to fully appreciate the hidden values of our rich Peranakan culture and heritage. Like many other fellow Peranakans I am sure, I was asking myself: How can our culture be reinvigorated, re-evaluated, re-marketed? I thought this called for it to be better managed, nurtured and promoted. Hence the birth of a cultural arts cum theatre company that can transform itself to meet various 'show-business' needs.

With a dedicated company of passionate babas and nyonys we've tailor-made our cultural services for locals and foreigners, tourism, conventions, corporates, outreach to schools, cultural exchanges, heartland events and Peranakan theatre. We also make time to perform at old folks homes, charity and fund raising concerts.

So far, I think Main Wayang has been the most active culture-based company in creating meaningful milestone events to help promote our culture and heritage. We have been lucky to find the balance to stay commercially viable and financially rewarding while being culturally enriching!

Who were your early influences? Who are your main sources of inspiration now?

Both my maternal and paternal grandmas of course! One brought me to the movies and shows, the other taught me how to cook, crochet, knit and bead (one grandma was queen of *manek* work). Some

ideas for my shows stem from their real experiences and stories. Later on, my influences were the doyens of *wayang Peranakan* from GSA, namely Baba Henry Tan (playwright) and Baba William Tan (cultural adviser). My mentor is Baba William Gwee, who has spent over 20 years advising and inspiring me to carry on with our Peranakan legacy. As the playwright of four plays that I directed for GSA, Baba William Gwee gave me plenty of rare and unusual insights into the mysteries and forgotten aspects of our rich heritage. He is also our Chief Cultural Adviser at Main Wayang. Even as we write, there are plans for a series of *akan datang* (coming) collaborations for Peranakan plays for 2012, 2013 and beyond.

What do you think is lacking in Peranakan drama these days?

Again, I do not think there is a lack. It is better to have a few great and meaningful plays than to have many low quality forgettable shows. The plays take time to be scripted, be it another theme about a family feud or unrequited love. The challenge lies in identifying scriptwriters who are competent in bringing to life our rich and unique patois. There is also a very limited pool of Peranakan actors. Unfortunately, many veterans are beginning to show their age. But the younger actors lack the maturity of the veterans. Dramas aside, other forms of telling a Peranakan epic came in the surprising



and phenomenal international success of our local TV production *The Little Nyonya*. It surpassed everyone's expectations, creating a monumental romantic notion for TV viewers to fall in love with all things Peranakan! This TV drama series has been shown internationally as far as Monte Carlo, the Philippines, Shanghai, Beijing and Indo-China. Suddenly anyone with the faintest link to Peranakan parentage would claim the identity. Not at all bad. Very good in fact.

Our *wayang Peranakan* needs to evolve and move away from just revolving around domestic family affairs. While we draw from our past, we must never stop re-inventing while re-discovering our heritage. We need to

CHAKAP CHAKAP

“Our *wayang* Peranakan needs to evolve and move away from just revolving around domestic family affairs. While we draw from our past, we must never stop re-inventing while re-discovering our heritage.”



see things from the younger generation’s perspective and find ways to infuse and interact with them.

Are there too few shows now?

Yes, particularly in 2011. Theatre venues are mostly fully booked and it is also well known that staging any *wayang Peranakan* production in Singapore is becoming increasingly expensive. Theatre rentals alone can kill!

Is it because of a lack of writers, performers or lack of community interest?

Not really. Writers need to be commissioned. Actors wait patiently to be called upon. And there is a hungry community of *wayang Peranakan* fans, young and old, dying to see a new show! Our Peranakan leaders from within our community should come together and truly plan ahead! Like any series of cultural festivities, it is important to work out various shows over a calendar year of events and seasons, with different cultural groups. There are enough stories to tell, shows to stage and a nurturing audience waiting to come forward and experience a continuous season of Peranakan theatre.

Would you say Peranakan theatre is dead? Are we seeing new trends?

The old *wayang Peranakan* will eventually, one day, fade away. But it is our duty and responsibility as a community to retain as much as possible of this traditional theatre form and still be prepared to see it reborn, just like our cultural icon, the phoenix. Art and culture can live on, hand in hand, with the amazing innovations and inventions in science



and technology. So we must allow all these elements to fuse and mature. A hi-tech, multi-media, multi-disciplinary Peranakan art form is waiting to be *beranak* (born)!

(Above) Showtime pizzazz with the SaNaNas from *Siapa Baba beranak* (born). (2008).

What are your plans for the future of Main Wayang?

Moving from our seventh year into our eighth, Main Wayang is restructuring and redefining ways of maximizing our *modus operandi* and minimising time spent on trivia, so we can be more productive. Numerous small shows and some big productions are already being lined up for the next few years.

Training and grooming of younger talents will always be an on-going task. A series of student workshops and cultural labs will culminate in our year-end production of *Malam Nostalgi* at Republic Polytechnic. There will be more Peranakan roadshows in the heartlands and overseas next year!

(Left) Richard Tan with MW Youth & Anak2 Wayang.





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STAGE DELIGHTS

To cook or not to cook? That is not the question, as Nyonya Linda Chee enters the kitchen of Peranakan thespians to sample recipes from the heart

Show me a Peranakan who can resist the delicious smells of *rempah tumis*, that heady mix of ground spices and root ingredients that is, like *pesto* to the Italians, so integral to our cuisine. Every family has its own special combinations of *rempah* to transform dishes into pure ambrosia – it may be the quintessential *masak buah keluak*, *laksa*, *mee siam* or less commonly heard recipes such as *hati babi*, *kangkong lemak masak keledak* or *terong pachi*.

Whether savoury or sweet, each family is likely to have favourite or iconic dishes. Mine is *popiah*, for sure. Every *popiah* session since my childhood has been many raucous days of massive preparation and cooking, culminating in a solid

day of mass eating! Friends and family remember every last *popiah* treat like it was yesterday, even if their session was years back. Having a grand meal together always creates that special kinship, which is why food brings on so many fond memories of childhoods spent with aunties, uncles and cousins in the large kitchens of Peranakan homes.

Taking the opportunity of this issue's focus on Peranakans in theatre, I asked some renowned babas and nyonys for recipes close to their heart. Dick Lee, Ivan Heng, Alvin Tan and Neo Swee Lin share favourite family recipes while Desmond Sim conjures up an exotic fusion that could just make long gone matriarchs of the kitchen turn in their graves – *buaya* (crocodile) *buah keluak*!

DICK'S FRIED RICE PARADISE

This is the ultimate comfort food for Baba Dick Lee as “it reminds me of my childhood, and especially of my grandaunt, Nek Lat, who looked after me. My mother also mastered this simple but sublime dish, which inspired me to write the song *Fried Rice Paradise*.”

Ingredients

6 bowls of cooked rice for 5 – 6 people
3 eggs
20 g small prawns or dry prawns (soaked and finely diced)
2 tbsp *sambal belachan*
1 cucumber (remove centre/pith and cut the white flesh into small cubes)

Seasoning

½ tbsp fish sauce
½ tbsp light soy sauce
½ cup chicken stock

Stir fry prawns/dry prawns till cooked, leave aside. Add 2 tablespoons oil into a hot wok then add

rice. Splash in the chicken stock and cover to cook for 2 minutes. Lift cover and the rice will be loose enough to fry. Add light soy sauce and fish sauce. Make a hole in the middle of the heap of rice in the wok, add a little oil and 3 lightly beaten eggs into the hole, stir the egg mixture a little, then cover it over with the rice. Leave the eggs to cook for ½ a minute, then stir-fry thoroughly. Add 2 tablespoons of *belachan*, and continue to stir-fry further. Throw in the prawns and stir in the cucumber cubes right at the end. Garnish with fried onions and serve.



All photographs by Jason Ong.

DALAM DAPOR

IVAN'S SATAY AYAM

Ivan Heng's grandmother's recipe is a firm favourite within the family: "She is no longer with us, but my mum cooks it every year for my birthday, just like grandma did."

Ingredients

1 medium-sized chicken, chopped into small pieces, left on the bone
6 ozs thick coconut milk (from 1 grated coconut)

Rempah

3 thin slices *lengkuas* (galangal)
4 stalks *serai* (lemongrass)
5 *buah keras* (candle nut)
40 shallots (small onions)
½ teaspoon *jintan puteh* (cumin)



¾ teaspoon *jintan manis* (caraway)
8 dried chillies

Grind the ingredients to a smooth *rempah* paste. Marinate the chicken for 1-2 hours.

Heat 1 tablespoon oil. Fry the chicken on medium heat. Add the coconut milk and fry till dry. Serve with rice.

ALVIN'S CHICKEN CURRY



This is one of Baba Alvin Tan's favourite dishes from his mother, Nyonya Lucy Loo nee Mrs Tan Kim Hoe, because it's comfort food. When he returns from an overseas trip, "chicken curry does the trick to address homesickness." As a student studying overseas, he used to cook "a great deal" but now that he is at home and so involved in theatre, "it doesn't make sense to cook when I'm staying with my mother and when the home-cooked food is easily accessible at hawker centres."

Ingredients

1 medium chicken cut into pieces
1 big onion sliced
1 thumb *kayu manis* (cinnamon stick)
3 *bunga chengkeh* (star anise)
8 tbsp Baba's Chicken Curry Powder
900 ml water
2 curry leaves
2 *pandan* leaves

Rempah

1 thumb ginger
4 garlic
12 shallots

Pound the ginger, garlic and shallots into a fine paste.

Heat oil till hot in a *kwali* (frying pan). Fry the big onion slices till light brown and set aside as a garnish. Using the same oil, *tumis* (fry) the pounded paste with the *kayu manis* and *bunga chengkeh* until the paste is light brown. Add the curry and *pandan* leaves to the mix.

Now add the curry powder and stir fry until smooth. Put in the chicken pieces. Stir for about a minute to coat the chicken evenly then add the water. Boil for 10 minutes. Reduce heat and simmer over slow fire for another 20 minutes before switching off. Remember to garnish with the fried sliced onions before serving.

DALAM DAPOR

SWEE LIN'S KOEWE SEMPRIT (Butter cookies)

Nyonya Swee Lin's recipe for butter cookies was passed down from her mother in Indonesia. "I am Peranakan on both sides. My dad is Singaporean and mum is originally Indonesian, having migrated from Padang, Sumatra, when she was about seven years old. Typically we follow more of my mother's side so our cooking is slightly different from local Peranakans."

The original recipe was written in Malay with the measures denoted in *mangkok* or bowls. Use regular Chinese rice bowls to measure the ingredients. This recipe makes approximately five baking trays of cookies.



Ingredients

3 bowls self-raising flour
1 bowl caster sugar
4 eggs (1 white only)
1 block of butter (250g)
Pinch of vanilla

Mix all the ingredients in a mixing bowl until you get the consistency of a cookie dough. Press out with a cookie cutter onto buttered baking trays. Bake at approximately 160 degrees C for 10-15 minutes.

DESMOND'S BUAYA BUAH KELUAK

Desmond Sim, your "Baba Food Explorer", prepared this exotic recipe for a themed potluck held at his home. "We were supposed to take an old favourite from our own cuisines, and cook it with a twist. I came up with this... which turned out to be a conversation piece!"

Adds Desmond: "You can also use ostrich and venison meat. However, you must be familiar with the cooking times of each of these meats. Cooking times vary with how thick or thin you slice the meats. Practice and you will be rewarded with some very exotic *buah keluak* dishes!"

Ingredients

500 - 600 gms crocodile meat (sliced to bite sized pieces)
2 large purple onions, quartered
1 tbsp *assam* (tamarind) - mixed with 600ml water and strained
1 tbsp brown or palm sugar (adjust to taste)
3 tbsp olive oil
3 - 4 tbsp *buah keluak* paste (Glory or Kim Choo brand)
1 - 2 tsp salt (adjust to taste)
2 stalks lemongrass (bash it to release flavour)

Rempah

2 cm length of galangal
2 cm length of turmeric
1 stalk lemongrass (use tender white lower part only)
5 dried chillies (deseeded)
2 candlenuts
10 shallots



1 tsp shrimp paste (*belachan*)
1 tsp coriander powder

Grind *rempah* ingredients to a fine paste. Stir fry the paste in olive oil till fragrant. Then remove all but 3 tablespoons of paste from the pan. Throw in quartered onions and fry till translucent. Sear crocodile meat by frying quickly. The meat is almost without fat, so it will dry out quickly. Do not allow it to do so. Remove the onions and meat from the pan once it appears to cook.

Put the reserved paste back into the pan. This time add *assam* water, *buah keluak* paste and condiments (salt, sugar etc) and the bashed lemon grass. Bring to boil. Once the sauce thickens, put the crocodile meat and onions back in, and simmer for another 3 minutes.

Serve with plain rice, *sambal belachan* and *nyonya achar*.

MOUTHWATERINGLY MODERN

Baba Colin Chee finds out from Sylvia Tan's new cookbook that preparing nyonya cuisine is not time-consuming after all.

Like this Peranakan cookbook by Sylvia Tan. It is made up of largely hearty yet simple recipes of dishes that my mum used to whip up on a daily basis. There is also a selection of festive dishes and while many of these would have typically taken whole days to cook, Sylvia has successfully distilled them to the key essentials, cutting back on cooking time without losing the rich, textural, aromatic fullness of celebratory Peranakan cuisine. The title of the book - **Modern Nonya** - is therefore very apt.

This book should prove a boon to our modern career-minded Miss who wishes to show mummy or mother-in-law that she is not completely useless in the area of the domestic arts!

There are recipes aplenty of simple nostalgic dishes: cold *tauhoo*, *babi asam garam*, *roti babi*, fishballs with cucumber and *tanghoon* soup, *papaya titek*, *babi tauyu*, *ikan chuan chuan*, *sotong masak hitam*, fried fish with various sauces and *sambals*, *nonya Hokkien mee*, *sambal kacang panjang*, and the all-time home favourite, *sambal timun*.

Babi tauyu for instance is not something that I find in many Peranakan cookbooks. I am glad to see it here because it is really an everyday dish that's simple to prepare and is simply *sedap* when done well. My wife learnt this quick-to-please dish from my mother-in-law and it is a dish served without fanfare. It must be eaten preferably piping hot with rice and when accompanied with a dollop of *belachan* you will be in soup heaven.

There are festive soups like *pong tauhoo* soup, *hee ploh* soup, *itek tim*, and *bakwan kepiting*. Other festive traditionals like *hati babi bungkus*, *babi pongteh*, *ayam buah keluak*, *kepiting masak tauchio*, *chap chai* and *nasi ulam* are also included.

As mentioned earlier, the recipes for these dishes look distilled for the convenience for our modern nyonya. However, they do not seem to be missing the critical ingredients and cooking steps that I am familiar with. So, while I have not tried the recipes *per se*, they should render authentic enough results.

What surprised me though are a few "fusion" dishes that I find edgily innovative, a twist on the traditional. There's Sylvia's *sambal buah keluak* topping on sliced baguette, a spicy tuna dip, and a

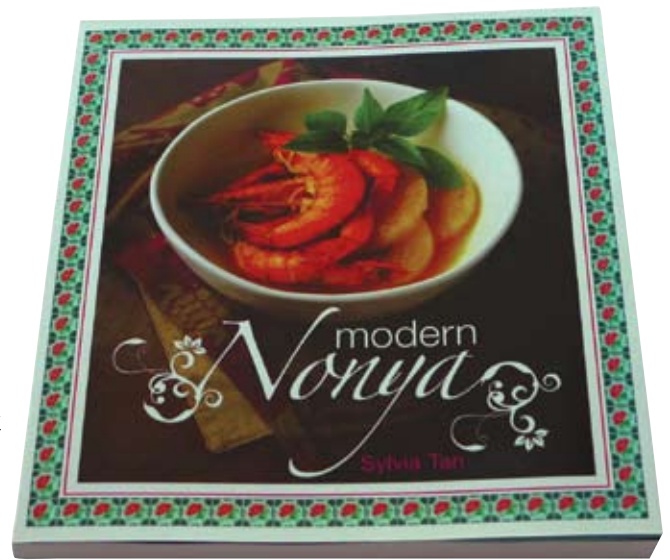
recipe for nyonya *char siu*. Very imaginative!

Like most babas, I can't go without my dessert after a sumptuous sleep-inducing meal. The latest of Sylvia's eight cookbooks also offers some mouth-watering death wishes like *bubor cha cha* ice cream, coconut bread pudding, coconut pancakes with *gula Melaka* and avocado mousse!

These are recipes to die for, lah. And it helps that the visuals look good enough to eat. ✨

Modern Nonya, a recipe book by Sylvia Tan, is published by Marshall Cavendish and available at all good bookstores.

Sylvia Tan's recipes have successfully cut back on cooking time without losing the fullness of celebratory Peranakan cuisine.





The evening's highlights included a grand wedding procession and a *dondang sayang* featuring doyen GT Lye.

THE PERANAKAN BALL 2011

The Wedding Banquet Goes Baba!

Over 530 guests indulged in a night of true Baba culture at The Peranakan Association Singapore's (TPAS) annual fund-raising Peranakan Ball. The theme was The Wedding Banquet and the event boasted an altar setup flanked by the bride, groom and their attendants.

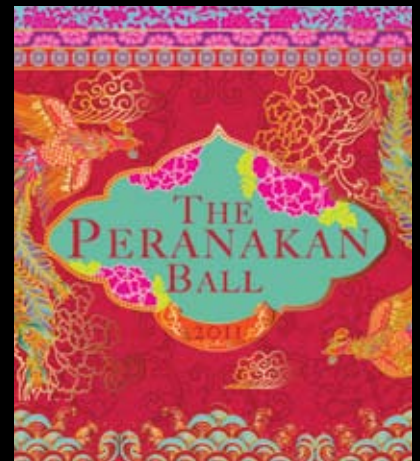
Photographs of the event are online at www.peranakan.org.sg.



TPAS President Baba Peter Wee and Dr Tony Tan make a celebratory toast to Peranakan culture.



No one needed an invitation to joget their hearts out on the dance floor – right till midnight!

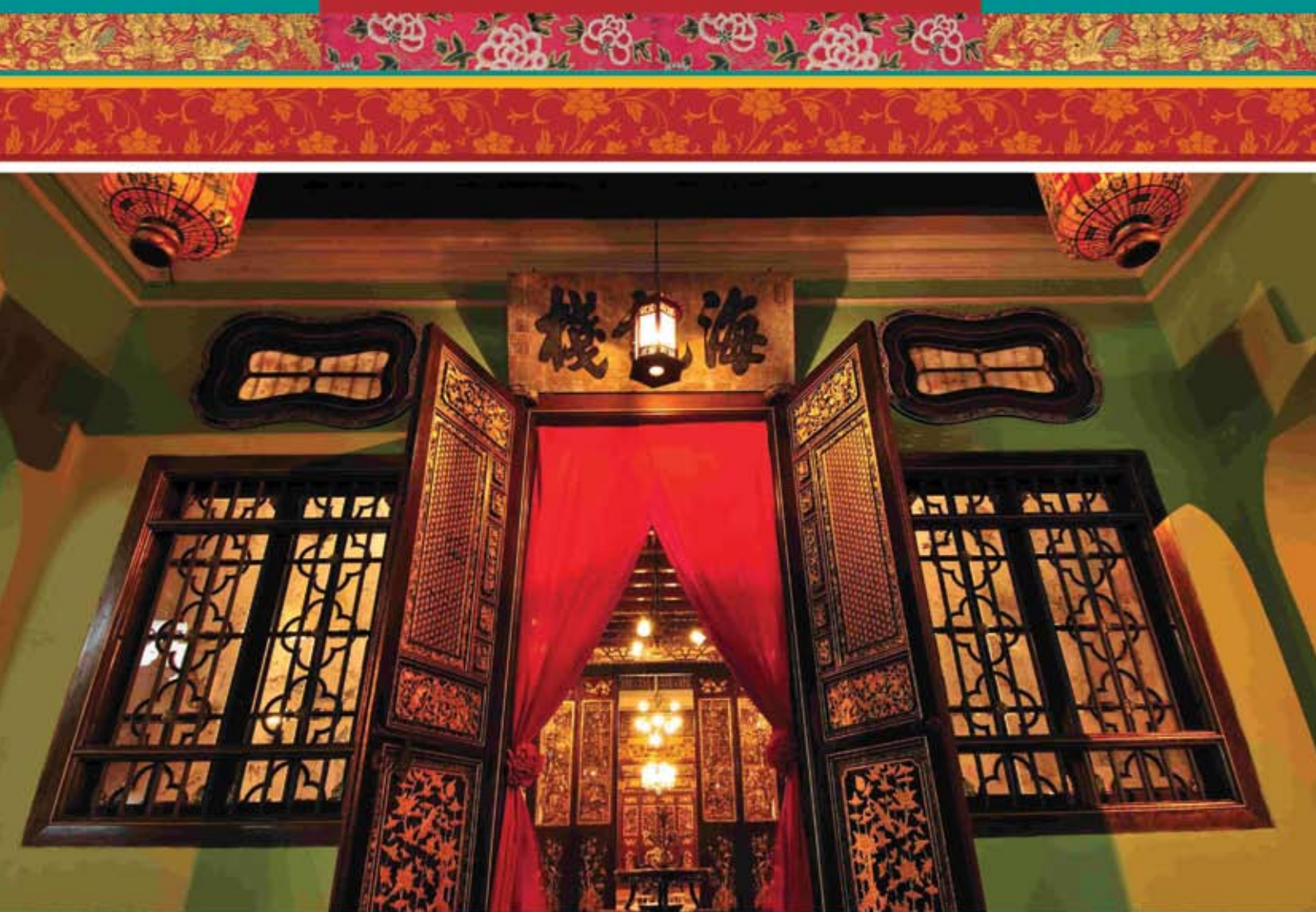


Just outside the main ballroom of the Grand Copthorne Waterfront Hotel, guests browsed a series of *jualan ketak ketik* stalls selling all manner of Peranakan-related items: exquisite jewellery, clothing, décor items, books and of course, kueh-kueh.



Happy guests in their gorgeous Peranakan attire.





DISCOVER THE PERANAKAN LEGACY



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



EVENTS

WORLD HERITAGE FASHION

Nyonya Lilian Tong reports from the Pinang Peranakan Mansion

Penang celebrates Georgetown as a UNESCO World Heritage Site with the annual Georgetown Festival in July. The theme for this year's celebration is "Peranakan Penang" and the Pinang Peranakan Mansion held a photo exhibition *Penang Straits Chinese: The Women* in conjunction with the launch of the Festival on 7 July 2011.

Select century-old portraits of nyonias, all unsmiling and austere yet refined and elegant stood on minimalist stark black boards in the middle of the Atrium Room. Among the portraits are the women in the life of Baba Lim Kek Chuan, founder of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Penang. A huge portrait of his mother, the matriarch Bibik Cheah Geok Kiat, a Malaccan nyonya, fills an entire doorway while Kek Chuan's three wives look on sadly. His first and second wives were sisters (*chiap au siew*) and both died young. These antique portraits are from a bigger private collection of photographs and portraits belonging to Mr Peter Soon, the owner of the Pinang Peranakan Mansion. These portraits were acquired from wealthy and prominent Peranakan families in Penang, and at the request of the families concerned, have been kept private. Some of these pictures are presented in their original wood and mirror frames. They are displayed for the first time for the Georgetown Festival 2011.

At the opening of the event, 21st century nyonias resplendent in colourful antique *boh khoo sah* and Chinese silk *baju panjangs* stood next to the portraits of these women from the past, gazing from their black and white portraits. These women are photographed at special moments and milestones in their lives. These compelling images hint at the stories and secrets that that lie beneath the fine gauze and gossamer *baju panjangs* clasped by dazzling *kerongsangs*. How intriguing! ❄




(Above) A grand tableau of nyonya attire at the Mansion's exhibition of rare antique portraits.



(Left) The three wives of Lim Kek Chuan, founder of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Penang, gaze sadly on.

A TREASURE TROVE OF VINTAGE COLLECTIBLES



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

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EVENTS

DOUBLE 90TH BIRTHDAY BASHES

Baba Patrick Tan celebrates the longevity of not one, but two Peranakan Grande dames!



(Right & above right) The cheerful nonagenarian Theresa Seet at her 90th birthday and as a child.

The Peranakan Voices had the rare honour of entertaining two *bibiks* who were both celebrating their 90th birthdays.

On Saturday, 21 May 2011, we joined family and friends to celebrate the birthday of Madam Tan Poeh Quee at her Watten Estate home, where we serenaded her with the customary birthday song followed by the cake-cutting.

Three Saturdays later, on 11 June, we celebrated the birthday of Madam Theresa Seet at the Dragon Phoenix Restaurant at Novotel Clarke Quay. Matriarch Seet was blessed with the presence of Archbishop Nicholas Chia, and our President, Baba Peter Wee. We sang five songs, after which the emcee for the evening, Baba Chan Eng Thai, presented and explained the significance of the symbolic birthday gifts.

Both ladies were also presented with plaques inscribed with specially-composed *pantons* by Baba Eng Thai. ❄

PASSIONATELY PERANAKAN

Nyonya Christine Ong reports on two PV engagements

On 18 May 2011, the Swissotel Merchant Court invited more than 250 special guests to indulge in authentic Peranakan dishes served in *tok panjang* (long table dining) style. The highlights of the evening were the singing and *joget* by the Peranakan Voices and a skit by stage doyen GT Lye.

On 9 July the Peranakan Voices took to the stage at the Grand Corpthorne Waterfront Hotel for a rousing performance that kept guests at the Peranakan Ball tapping their feet and singing along to familiar tunes. ❄



(Right) The Peranakan Voices swaying to song at the Peranakan Ball.

The Peranakan Voices welcome members who would like to join them! Please email pv@peranakan.org.sg for more information.

Would you like the Peranakan Voices to perform at your event or function? Please email alvin@busads.comsg

SYDNEY JOINS THE FAMILY

Baba Freddie Cheah is excited about the new member from Down Under

Australia opens a new chapter in the Peranakan history book with Sydney being the latest member of the regional community of associations. More than 50 people have signed up to be “foundation members” of the newly established Peranakan Association Australia NSW, Inc (PAANSW), which will be inaugurated later in the year on 18 September.

Malacca-born Evelyn Tian, President of the new

association, said the event was the culmination of an eight-year old dream-come-true. It would enable the Peranakans in Sydney to preserve their heritage and culture. “We also want to tell others about our sarong kebayas, beaded slippers and all those things that we are familiar with,” Evelyn added.

She shared that the President of the Peranakan association in Melbourne, Alfred Chi, had long wished for Sydney to start a chapter, noting that “Alfred was only too happy to help”. Their first event was a Chinese New Year dinner celebration with plenty of singing, *ronggeng* and many ladies in colourful sarong kebayas. It was a time of joy as the *tok panjang* creaked under the weight of food, some not seen by the diners for years. Dishes such as *ayam sioh*, *babi chin* and *chinchalok*, and desserts such as *kueh bengkah* and *seri kaya* had brought back memories of childhood in Malaysia and Singapore.

Besides Evelyn, the other Executive Committee members are Jerry Tan, First Vice-President; Josephine Lim, Second Vice-President; Adrian Watts, Honorary Secretary; and Derrick De Souza, Honorary Treasurer. Committee members are Donald Tan, Lian Tan, Nigel Tan, Bibi Teo and Jim Teoh. ❄

(Left) The new Sydney chapter President Evelyn Tian (second from right) with the other founding committee members.



A G'DAY FOR KUEH CHANG

Nyonya Ivy Lee-Chan Gek Kim joins in the dumpling feast from Melbourne

On the surprisingly sunny Saturday afternoon of 4 June 2011, 73 members and friends of the Peranakan Association Australia Inc. in Melbourne gathered to celebrate the *Kueh Chang* Festival. Some turned up dressed to the nines in sarong kebayas and *baju panjang*. This made for great photographs and conversation starters, to the delight of all present.

Lunch, which gave participants time for further interaction, gossip and the sharing of news, was an eclectic spread of *gado gado*, fried *kway teow*, fried noodles, *rojak* and baked chicken.

Following lunch, we were treated to a talk on Peranakan architecture by Ewe Jin Low, an architect by profession. Armed with beautiful powerpoint slides, Ewe Jin took us on a tour of Heeren Street in Malacca. President Alfred Chi then expressed his appreciation on behalf of the Association by presenting Ewe Jin a memento.

Rounding off appropriately, *nyonya chang* and *kee chang*, as well as varieties of *nonya kueh* formed the dessert spread. The gathering settled down to end the enjoyable afternoon with an exciting game of *Bingo*. ❄



(Left) Dressing up to the nines at the *Kueh Chang* Festival.

PANTON ORANG MENINGGAL (ODE TO THE DEPARTED)

Baba Cedric Tan from Kuala Lumpur exchanges *pantons* with Babas Lee Yuen Thien and Aaron Loo from Melaka in a unique tribute to two senior Babas on social media, Facebook

The sudden and unexpected passing of two well-known Babas in the Peranakan community spurred an expression of sadness among three friends through a cultural manner that we knew they would be proud of – the *panton*.

Though all three of us – Babas Lee Yuen Thien, Aaron Loo and I – are practising Buddhists, the *pantons* we composed carry a creator God theme. This theme is culturally accepted amongst traditional Peranakans as they openly embrace positive values of the religion. In the past, such *pantons* would be sung during the funeral wake with the accompanying *asli* music or even cried out aloud during the *meratap* (wailing) by the coffin. Since we were unable to attend the wake, we shared our sadness via Facebook postings.

The opening *panton* was composed and posted on Facebook as a mark of respect to the late Baba Tay Lip Hock, a previous President of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka, who died suddenly on 12 June 2011. The jovial and hardworking fundraiser, who happened to be my cousin's husband, collapsed after completing a hill climb during his holiday in Sri Lanka. I was in Kuala Lumpur when Baba Lee Yuen Thien in Malacca informed me of the shocking news. *Pantons* two, three and six are an exchange between Baba Lee and me on Facebook.

A few hours after my posting, Baba Tony Quek from Singapore messaged me on Facebook: Baba James Tan, brother of Gunong Sayang Association (GSA) vice-president Baba Thomas Tan, had collapsed and died at the rest station at Pagoh on his way up north from Singapore. I fondly remember Baba James as the “speak less, do more”, tall, slim and regal gentleman who helmed the stage manager position in most of GSA's *wayang Peranakan* productions in recent years. His quiet achievements never escaped my attention. *Pantons* four and five were an exchange between Baba Aaron Loo and me.

Baba Tay and Baba James, your work is done and it is time to move on. Until we meet again, may you find peace wherever you may be. ❄



The late Babas Tay Lip Hock (top) and James Tan (above) gave their time tirelessly to the Peranakan communities in Malacca and Singapore.

<i>Banyak udang dalam peti Mana sama udang galah</i>	In the crate lies many a prawn To the giant prawn none is comparable
<i>Banyak orang datang pergi Mana sama kawan lama</i>	Many people have come and gone To my old chums none are comparable
<i>Nasi kemuli makan temaru</i>	Spiced rice for Lunar New Year
<i>Sambal belachan sama chincharu</i>	With shrimp paste and mackerel we feted
<i>Naseb badan siapa lah tahu Sampay masa Tuan-Allah lah tahu</i>	For life's journey no one is clear In the Lord's hand it is all fated
<i>Ayer perigi sejok ngilu Baik chepat bila mandi Dia pergi setapak dulu Akherat jugak bersua nanti</i>	Well water is freezing cold Make haste if you take a bath He left earlier into His fold In the next world we will cross paths
<i>Tiop seroni di Tanjong Tuan</i>	Strains of clarinet from the end of the Cape Quartrtain of love I hereby sing
<i>Dondang sayang sudah dinyanyi Idop mati di tangan Tuhan</i>	In the Lord's hands we leave our fate
<i>Orang yang pergi sudah dijanji</i>	For his leaving is to His bidding
<i>Burong lepas terbang tinggi Tangan kotor chepat chuchi Dia nang mati lepaskan pergi Tinggal nang hidop jagalah diri</i>	The freed bird flying up high in the sky Leaving the stained hand to be scrubbed upon Now that he has gone we bid goodbye As we pick ourselves up and carry on
<i>Nasi lemak wantan mee Buat makan sarapan pagi Naik ke shorga Baba Hock pergi Baik toksah susah hati</i>	Coconut rice and wantan noodles too A sumptuous breakfast we heartily partake Up to heaven Baba Hock has taken leave to Let us not be sad but be thankful, mate

NOTICEBOARD

PERANAKAN ASSOCIATIONS IN THE REGION

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Raffles City PO Box 1640,
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Association of Chetti Melaka (Peranakan Indians) Singapore

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MALAYSIA

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Fax: 06 2837 215
To contact the President, Datuk Phua Jin Hock, please email phuahj@gmail.com.

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P O Box 3810, Marsfield, NSW 2122
Australia
Contact: Evelyn Tan, President
website: www.peranakanaustralia.org
Email: evelyn.peranakan@gmail.com

WELCOME

A big welcome to our new members:

Mr Jeremy Chian Kim Choy	Mr Khoo Teck Kim
Mrs Mary Narayanan	Mr Philip Khoo Teng Lip
Mdm Ng Toon Mae	Mrs Julia Dawn Gray

OBITUARY

Our deepest sympathies to the families of our esteemed members who have passed on:

Mr Lee Kip Lin	Mdm Mona Quek Seow Eng
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PERANAKAN CONVENTION 2011

This year's Peranakan Convention will be held in Penang from 25 - 27 November, 2011. The Penang Straits Chinese Association is organising the annual event. Further details will be out soon. Surf into our website peranakan.org.sg for the latest updates. Please contact our Hon Secretary Lim Geok Huay at 62550704 for more details.

BEAUTY AND THE BEADS

Beading conference and competition
7-9 October, 2011, Sarawak

The 2nd Borneo International Beads Conference aims to facilitate interaction between Sarawak's artisans, their international counterparts and collectors to secure the continued production and future of this precious art form.

In conjunction with the conference, the **Borneo International Bead Award, BIBA**, is open to all craftspeople over 18 years of age to submit entries in three categories: Bead work ('seed beads', *rocaille*) for personal adornment; bead stringing of accessories for personal adornment; and bead making in glass, ceramic or other materials.

For details, please click on the website www.crafthub.com.my, or contact Heidi Munan, the Hon. Curator of Beads, Sarawak Museum, at crafthub@gmail.com.

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
 Email: nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg
 Tel: 6332 7591.



Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion and its International Sources

Now on till 26 February 2012. Prevailing admission rates apply.

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>.

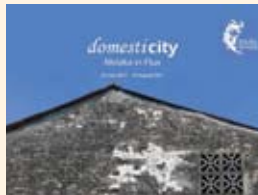
Baba House. This heritage house at 157 Neil Road opened on 4 September 2008. Go back in time to 1928 and experience what a grand Peranakan terraced house



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>

Domesticity: Melaka in Flux is an exhibition in the 3rd floor gallery of Baba House (16 July - 15 August), about the Malaysian city's urbanisation and changing face. It is a joint effort of international students in the Alliance of Research Universities Global Summer Programme.



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: 6332 2982, 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/dds2h/blair/study/Blair.html.

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

Katong and Joo Chiat. Once 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.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: 6423 4616.

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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AT
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