



the peranakan

ISSUE 1 • 2013



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Cover: Portrait of a married couple, Penang, 1920s; see Cross-dressing Chameleons, page 4.



THE
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ASSOCIATION
SINGAPORE

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BEING CHINESE



Welcome to 2013, the Year of the Snake. We have safely passed the so-called day of the Mayan apocalypse (21 December 2012), which came and went like any other day, and it is now time to celebrate the dawn of the new serpentine year. The lunar new year represents the beginning of yet another calendar cycle, whose rotations have been historically documented in Chinese history for millennia, and it has become the time of year when Chinese reaffirm their Chineseness through the re-enactment of traditions.

The new year also marks a new editorial direction for *The Peranakan*. Each issue for 2013 will be spearheaded by a different member of the editorial committee. I have been tasked to present the first issue. As a tribute to the Chinese New Year, I have compiled some stories concerning Peranakan expressions of Chinese identity. There is one burning question facing every baba and nyonya that has no immediate answer: what does it mean to be Chinese? The Peranakans have a particularly complex relationship with identity, and being Chinese. Even today, the modern Peranakan grapples with being Peranakan, Chinese, Singaporean, as well as a global citizen.

Our nyonyas have been dealing with similar issues since time immemorial. The article *Cross-Dressing Chameleons* puts the spotlight on how Chinese costume has been employed by Peranakan women to express a facet of themselves. An article about a new exhibition at NUS Baba House also draws attention to evolving expressions of identity in portraits of Peranakans, and how Chinese dress is also presented or adapted as part of the process.

The houses and interiors of the Peranakans in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand are also stages where Chineseness, Peranakan-ness and modernity are negotiated. On this subject we have the insights of American author Ron Knapp, who brought global attention to the subject of Peranakan homes with his *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia* (2010), and has now completed a second work on this theme: *The Peranakan Chinese Home*.

On a humorous note, our resident legal pundit looks at identity through personal names. Ironically

choosing to write under a pseudonym, Lawyer Burok, the author elucidates readers on legal issues pertaining to personal names. As a final treat, may I invite you to wallow in Chineseness... three chefs, Bebe Seet, Philip Chia and Sylvia Tan, reveal their guilty pleasures... their favourite pork recipes, in *Babi Baba*, our tribute to this most beloved of Peranakan ingredients.

This first issue for 2013 ultimately aims to celebrate and liberate Peranakan identity. As a community we need to blur the barriers, reach out to draw more links and connections to other communities, and to stop thinking of ourselves in terms of what makes us different (and to many of the old generation, 'superior'), but rather, what makes us the same, what draws us to common ground. I hope we can obliterate the contradictory term *Peranakan jati* (pure, or true Peranakan) — it is as ridiculous as the idea of a pedigree mongrel — and ultimately, to celebrate the multiple facets of who we are, radiant like a brilliant-cut diamond.

Selamat Taon Baru.

Peter Lee

Guest Editor for Issue 1, 2013

TUA-EE/EE-CHIK

A new play by GT Lye

Presented by The Peranakan Association, Singapore

Ngee Ann Auditorium,

Asian Civilisations Museum

17-20 April 2012

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Sambot Taon Baru Ular Peranakan Mass

Saturday 9 February 2013 at 11pm, Church of the Holy Family, 6 Chapel Road, Singapore.

Mass and hymns in Baba Malay. All are welcome!

Editor's Note: In 'The Peranakan Art of Giving', *The Peranakan*, Issue 4, 2012, page 4 the number of chicken eggs among the traditional presents for a *tua seh jit* or grand birthday should be a dozen rather than a pair. We thank Mr G.T. Lye for pointing out this factual error.

The acronym for the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation (whose first chairman, incidentally, was a Baba), was appropriated in the second half of the 20th century to describe the Peranakans. OCBC expresses a certain perspective of Peranakan identity: Orang China Bukan China (Chinese but not Chinese).

CROSS-DRESSING CHAMELEONS

Baba Peter Lee examines the Nyonyas' affinity for Chinese fashion

Anyone who tells you he can define the term *Peranakan* is trying to pull the wool, or should I say a batik sarong, over your eyes. Surely there is no one answer. Peranakan identity is multi-faceted, evolving, slippery, and full of contradictions. Perhaps therein lies its beauty. Perhaps also, all cultural identities are equally indefinable. Historians and 'specialists' try to draw clear boundaries, and contrive a world of black and white from the fifty, I mean, myriad, shades of grey. But how far do they reflect reality? How Peranakan women have engaged with Chinese costume over the centuries, as pioneers of transcultural cross-dressing, reveals how nebulous the concept of 'identity' can be.

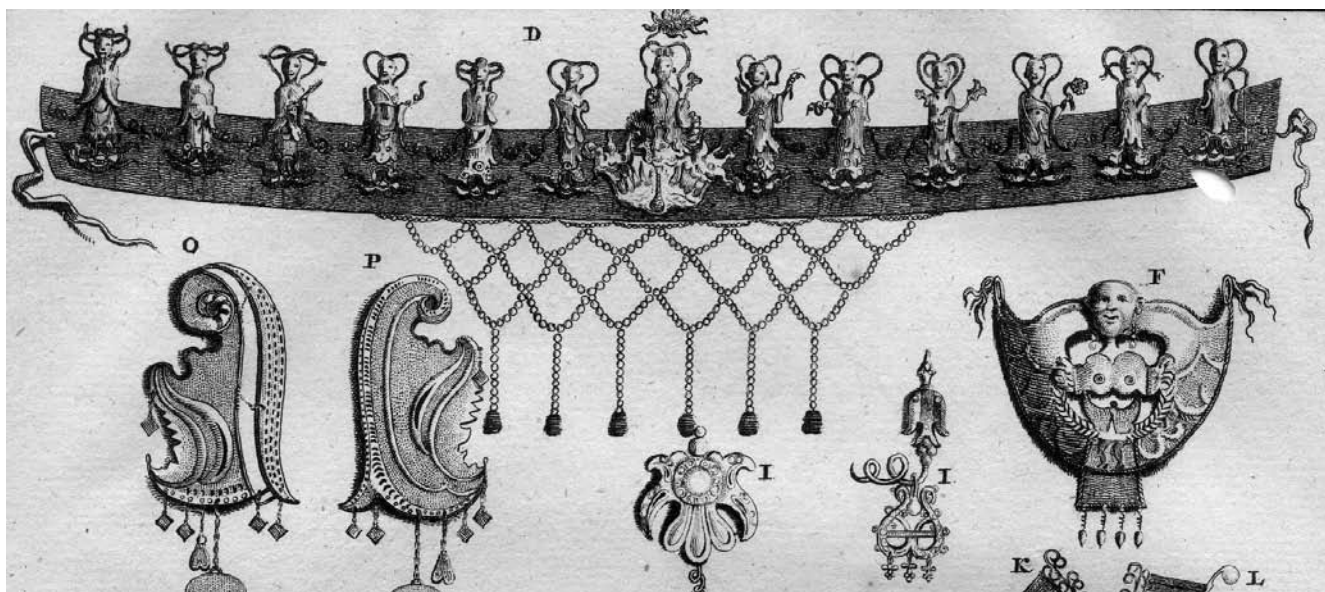
Peranakan women emerged from the cosmopolitan, mixed-race environment of Dutch and British colonial towns several centuries ago, via unions between Chinese migrant males from Fujian, and enslaved females from Bali, Sumatra or Sulawesi among other islands. They have been, from the very beginning, adept at performing a balancing act, or I daresay, at catwalking, or even doing the *lenggang-lenggok*, on the tight-rope of cultural identity. Ostensibly, Peranakan women can be identified as 'Chinese'. Yet, even two old accounts from the 1690s Batavia would seem to question exactly how 'Chinese' such Chinese women were at that time. According to a 1699 entry in the *Kaiba Lidai Shiji* (the 17th and 18th century Chinese chronicles of Batavia, present-day Jakarta) a certain Madame Teo, a native Chinese woman appeared in a junk at the port of Batavia, and hordes of locals thronged the pier to catch a glimpse of a real China-born lady, the likes of which so few had ever seen. Even the governor of the city was curious enough to want to invite her to his palace. The French explorer François Leguat, who was in Batavia in 1696, also noted that in that city, "there were only three women born in China."

Peranakan women spoke only the *Melayu Pasar* or colloquial Malay that was widely used throughout the islands of the archipelago, as they had no access to Chinese education like some of their menfolk. Yet as wives and



Young bride showing off the Straits-style of wearing the cheongsam: with loads of diamonds on her dress and hair, Penang, 1920s.

daughters of Chinese men, they were all formally inducted into a Chinese cultural world through several ways, mostly ceremonial. One of the first steps in converting a non-Chinese into becoming one, was by adoption. In the records of the Chinese Council of Batavia, there is a 1788 case of a Chinese man, Chua Chiat Beng, who asked a close friend to adopt his prospective non-Chinese bride so that she could 'become Chinese' and be therefore



Details of Chinese bridal headgear from Ambon, illustrated in François Valentijn's *Oud en Nieuw Oost Indien* (1726).

acceptable as his wife. She adopted a typical Hokkien girl's name: Tan Hian Neo. There were many instances though, where slave girls remained slave girls, even though they produced offsprings for the Chinese men who owned them. For example, the late 18th century will of Tan In Sing of Malacca, filed among India Office Records now in the British Library, the slave Tjoenoea was recognised as the mother of his daughter Tan Soei Hon. So if a slave or concubine of a Chinese man was not officially inducted into the Chinese cultural and family circle, at least her children were recognised, by virtue of their Chinese names, as Chinese.

Baptism and Burial by *Baju*

Another way in which Chineseness was asserted was through dress. It is unclear when the wives of Chinese men in the Malay archipelago first donned Chinese costume. But certainly by the early 18th century, Chinese fashions were certainly being worn by brides and daughters of the Chinese in far-flung Dutch colonies. The Dutch author and pastor François Valentijn witnessed such an occasion in 1709 at the wedding of the daughter of the Chinese kapitan of Ambon:

"At six in the evening we found the bride sitting in a large side parlour. She was wearing a wide Chinese skirt of apple-blossom-coloured silk, a beautiful piece of work, which was held around her waist with a precious black leather belt, or girdle, adorned with massive golden sheets that were artfully decorated; it was about three fingers wide and tied together.

On her head she wore a beautiful apple-blossom-coloured silk cap, or round bonnet, with a similar trim or edge as the belt around her waist, but a little narrower, but with the same gilded decorations on a black ground, on top of which there were also many pearls, diamonds, and other gemstones, in addition to several more rows of threaded pearls hanging from the cap, as long as a hand span.

She had on her feet silk stockings and white mules, and

looked more like a man than a woman in this outfit, especially since she was a rather fat female of about nineteen or twenty."

Among the many fascinating illustrations in this book is a rather detailed rendering of the head ornaments worn by a Chinese bride at that time, including the small gold or silver repoussé figures of the eight immortals applied onto a cloth headband worn by the bride. These are almost identical to the headgear of Peranakan brides in the early twentieth century. They reveal the continuity and persistence of wedding attire for the Peranakan Chinese throughout the Malay Archipelago.

Clearly Chinese silks, fashions, and tailors were evident in Batavia in the 18th century. This is apparent from contemporary illustrations, such as by the missionary Jan Brandes, who depicted high-ranking Chinese of the town in Qing court robes. In the early 19th century, the records of the Chinese Council of Batavia also make references to silk and clothing shops in the town. One 1824 case describes a clothing shop run by two partners, Loh Poh and Chia Koh Chin, and their stock included imported satin, various types of Indian cloth including some from Calcutta, some Chinese cloth, and also Chinese vests.

The earliest photographic images of what could possibly be a Nyonya bride from Batavia (present-day Jakarta) were taken by the studio of Woodbury and Page, some time in the 1860s (see next page). The Batavian bride is dressed in what can best be described as a pastiche of an ensemble, put together in a manner that suggests that fine China-made embroidered robes were somehow unavailable at that time, perhaps a consequence of the tumult from the Taiping Rebellion in the 1850s, as a *baju kurung* had been paired with an embroidered Chinese skirt. Jewels made up for simplicity, as gold and silversmiths were readily available in Batavia. Although photography had arrived in Singapore by the mid-19th century, brides and grooms seem to have shied away from the camera until the 1910s, and by then the full finery and excess of Peranakan bridal costume (*baju*



An elderly nyonya in her baju tua, Java, 1900s.

kawen or baju kemanteng) were fully evident, and by then the full finery and excess of Peranakan bridal costume were fully evident, and finely embroidered wedding robes were readily available.

Up to the early twentieth century, the only other possible occasions a Nyonya donned a Chinese robe happened upon reaching her 61st birthday, or every decade thereafter. The multi-layered *baju tua* (robe of old age) was ordered by local agents and came from China, and it was understood that the same robe would be used to dress her remains upon her demise. The term and practice derive from the ancient Hokkien tradition of *teo lao* (张老, announcing old age), which referred to preparations for one's death, such as the acquisition of grave clothes (寿衣, *siu-i*), coffin, silk hangings, in one's lifetime, which a woman was permitted to own from the age of 61. Burial clothes were known as *teo lao sah* (张老衫) or *teo lao e mih* (张老物). There could be between three to eleven layers of Ming-style robes (seven was considered appropriately grand), and among Babas, the clothes were also crudely referred to as *baju mati* (death robes).

Straits Chinese reform and the *baju koon-sah*

One of the biggest impacts of the age of imperialism in Asia was the push to articulate and define ethnicity and nationality. Not only the natural world, but human life also, were subjected to a world defined by classifications of race and nationality. In the struggle to contrive a space in this new world order, Peranakan leaders invented the concept of the Straits Chinese, and in 1900 formed the Straits Chinese British Association (the first incarnation of The Peranakan



A Chinese bride in Batavia (Jakarta), 1860s, by the studio of Woodbury and Page.

Association), which loudly proclaimed that their mixed-race community was by definition Chinese, yet geographically located in the Straits, and loyal only to the British crown. The British-educated lawyer Song Ong Siang and medical doctor Lim Boon Keng, were the leaders of this movement. Through their mouthpiece, *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, both promoted the idea of 'civilising' the Nyonya through Christian morals, education, and understanding Chinese culture, as they considered many social habits and superstitions of the nyongas as degenerate. This degeneracy was also a byproduct of the 'racial deterioration' (Lim Boon Keng's words) that came about when people were of mixed blood. The irony of the situation was that Lim Boon Keng, a vocal promoter of Chinese culture, could barely speak Chinese himself.

As a result of their harangues, Peranakan women were encouraged to, and began wearing Chinese fashions, especially on occasions where members of other communities were present. In a family context (at weddings and birthdays), a woman could relax and be comfortable as a Malay-speaking nyonya dressed in a sarong kebaya. But when she stepped out into the



Mrs Lee Choon Guan in a baju koon sah, high heels and diamonds, at Mandalay Villa, Singapore, mid 1920s (image courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa).



Mrs Tan Jiak Kim in baju koon sah and diamonds, Singapore, 1910s (image courtesy of Mr Richard Tan Tiang Teck).

public eye, she had to pretend to be a demure Chinese lady. The latest Chinese fashion, an ensemble comprising a skirt (裙, *koon* in Hokkien) and blouse (衫, *sah* in Hokkien), was adopted by the nyonya wives of several prominent babas, referred to in Baba Malay as *baju koon-sah*. The outfit could be in colourful silk brocade, or in cool tropical white cotton, trimmed with lace or broderie anglaise, and always worn with the latest flapper-girl high heels and mary-janes. Some nyonias, like Mrs Lee Choon Guan, first president of the Chinese Ladies' Association, never ever wore sarong kebaya once they switched to Chinese fashions. There was one marked difference of this fashion worn in the Straits Settlements: nyonias pinned enormous diamond brooches, the larger the better, on their blouses. Such massive brooches were conceived long before flying saucers were even thought of! Mrs Lee Choon Guan and Mrs Tan Jiak Kim were among the chief advocates of this excess, although the pioneer was probably the famous and infamous Ho Sok Choo Neo, older



The much-married Ho Sok Choo Neo, wearing a monogrammed kerosang set with the initials of her maiden name (with only the 'H' and 'S' visible), 1910s (image courtesy of Mrs Lim Hap Hin, née Chua Swee Lan, and family).

cousin of Mrs Lee Choon Guan, and widow of Wee Siang Tat, heir of shipping tycoon Wee Bin's fortune. She had the initials of her name fashioned into search-lights for her kebaya, assembled from loose diamonds kept in cigarette tins. But even they were completely overshadowed by the Peranakan bride during the *chia lang kek*, or wedding banquet, who, like the world's first zero-carbon-emission Christmas tree, would be dressed in a version of this costume, termed a *baju hock chiew*, emblazoned with diamond jewellery sparkling across the front of her blouse.

Dr Lee Choo Neo, the first Chinese woman in Singapore to become a doctor, favoured the simple

and feminine white cotton version in the 1910s and 1920s (see next page). In the Indies, the movement to be 're-Sinicised' was even more strident and powerful. Chinese fashions were equally popular in the early 1900s, and variations in style were even more creative and stylish, with versions even made of printed cottons and plush velvet. The blouse, referred to as a *baju péki*, was worn either with a matching Chinese style skirt, or with a fine batik sarong.

Cheongsam and Sam Foo

The Manchurian *qipao* (旗袍), the official robe at the Chinese imperial court for both men and women during the Qing period (1644-1911) began to be modernised in the early 20th century. That was when influential women such as Wan Rong, wife of the last emperor of China, dressed in a form-fitting version. Often worn with a *magua* (马褂) or vest, the first modern *qipao* filtered down the social ladder, and was adopted even by courtesans. In the 1920s, fashionable girls in Shanghai began wearing a scandalously short version, showing off their calves and fashionable silk stockings. By the 1930s the influence



A young bride in her baju hock chiew, Singapore, 1920s.



Dr Lee Choo Neo, dressed in a white baju koon sah, referred to in Java as a baju pèki, Semarang, 1917 (image courtesy of Mrs Vera Teo).



Lee Poh Neo, daughter of Lee Choon Guan, dressed in an early version of the samfoo, her hair cut with the latest moh-swee fringe, 1914 (image courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa).

of the Shanghai cinema resulted in the birth of a long, ankle-length version of the *qipao*, with a high side slit. This became the iconic costume for Chinese women of the twentieth century, and was immediately adopted by fashionable ladies in the Straits Settlements, where it was first known as a *Shanghai gown* and a *chongsum* (sic, 长衫, a rather poor transliteration of the Cantonese term for a long gown) in the local press. Modern nyonys in the 1930s abandoned their sarong kebayas for this, while older ladies chose to wear the *qipao* at formal events where members of other races were present. It was not until the 1950s that the term *cheongsam*, a more accurate Cantonese pronunciation of the term for a long gown, became widely current, perhaps as a result of the rise of Hong Kong as the centre of popular Chinese culture and film production.

From the 1910s young girls also began wearing the more casual *samfoo* (衫裤, blouse and trousers, also a Cantonese term) comprising a short-sleeved or sleeveless blouse and matching trousers, which was derived from a traditional Chinese costume. Mrs Betty Lim Koon Teck, a descendant of Tan Tock Seng, remembered that as a young girl in the 1910s she was dressed in “striped or floral *samfoos* and beaded slippers”. She and her sister were among the first nyonys to switch to cheongsams:

“Amy and I wore cheongsams to the party and caused quite a stir because in those days most women wore sarong kebayas or skirts and blouses. In fact, from the age of fourteen or fifteen we had already started wearing sarong kebayas whenever we attended any formal parties. For this particular party, we wore three-quarter-length cheongsams

which had short slits. They were very fashionable. We were also given permission by grandma to apply rouge on our cheeks and a little lipstick which my brother had brought back from Shanghai. Amy had her hair in a traditional sanggol but I had my hair in the style of a straight bob with a fringe.”

By the 1950s the cheongsam had reached the apogee of its popularity, and not only women wanted to be dressed in one. Ruby Lee, jailed at Outram Prison in 1955 for failing to pay a traffic fine (how things haven’t changed!), was discovered at the prison medical examination to have been a man. Dressed in a powder blue cheongsam, she was interviewed by the papers upon her release, and was questioned about her fashion choices. “But why this *chongsum*? Don’t you like trousers?” the journalist enquired. “Pants! I hate pants. I love to be a woman. I have always wanted to be one. Prison, ridicule, persecution. Nothing will change me. I will fight back with lipstick and mascara,” she replied. When asked what she missed most in jail, she said, “Why, of course, my lipstick, you silly.” (“The man in a woman’s world brazens it out with lipstick and mascara”, *The Straits Times*, 7 October 1955, p. 7.)

In the second half of the 20th century, western fashions replaced not only the sarong kebaya but also the cheongsam. Both stopped becoming fashionable and were frozen in time as traditional costume. Up to the present, like the nyonys before them, Peranakan women dress according to their mood, the occasion, and to which of their own cultural personality they

wished to present. Like chameleons, they donned the latest fashions from Prada, to sarong kebaya from Rumah Bebe, or a seductive *cheongsam* from Lai Chan, at their whim and fancy. These unapologetic shifts and choices can best be summed up in a conversation I recently had with my 92-year old aunt, who grew up wearing *samfoo*, sarong kebaya, *cheongsam*, and Gucci. “Are you Peranakan or Chinese?” I asked. “Peranakan of course,” she replied without hesitation. “So why do you wear the cheongsam then?” I challenged. She looked at me incredulously, as if I were asking her the silliest question she had ever heard in nine decades, and proclaimed, “Because I am Chinese!” *

Information and notes will be available in Peter Lee’s upcoming book on the fifty shades of Peranakan identity and on the sarong and kebaya, soon to be published by the Peranakan Museum. All other images are from the author’s collection.



Top: Alice and Agnes Tan, daughters of Tun Tan Cheng Lock, in identical long cheongsams and furs, London, 1940s.



Left: The short cheongsam, popular among Peranakan society ladies in the mid 1920s. Seated from left are Mrs S.Q. Wong, Mrs Lee Choon Guan, an unidentified lady, and Mrs Tan Cheng Lock. Standing at left and right are Alice and Alice Tan, daughters of Tan Cheng Lock, dressed in 20s-style samfoo. The photograph was taken at Tan Cheng Lock’s seaside villa at Klebang, Malacca, mid 1920s.



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IT'S ALL IN THE NAME

Lawyer Burok looks at how names can make or break you

Mama ada pergi tanya Datok apa pasal si Beng Chye selalu sakit.

Datok chakap kita tak boleh teriak dia Beng Chye, kita kena panggil dia si Busok.

Kalau ini macham dia nanti kuat sehat sama panjang umur!

So what happened when Mama (grandmother) ruled the household and said that the Gods had advised that her grandson should not be called by his name Beng Chye and should be called Busok (the smelly one)? As Mama ruled the waves, Beng Chye was thereafter called and responded to the name 'Busok'. By the way, Busok is still alive and well at the age of eighty eight!

Changing one's name is done by a Deed Poll. As its name suggests, it is a document that a person must sign to have his or her name changed to that he or she desires; next to the signature of the person on the document would have to be a red seal as the document is a Deed.

Children and those below twenty one years can have their names legally changed also, but their Deed Polls would have to be signed by their parents together (or by one parent but with the written consent of the other parent). Surnames or family names and one's race, cannot be changed, only the middle name and/or the addition of Western or Christian names (but now any other names not deemed offensive or against public decency) can be added.

The name given at birth as shown in the birth certificate of the person who had legally changed name by a Deed Poll cannot be changed. The identity card and passport can be changed to reflect the new name.

So why do people change their names by way of a Deed Poll? Some consult Feng Shui masters or temple mediums or monks after experiencing mishaps or difficulties in their lives. Advice would be given to change their Chinese names or the character of their Chinese names as the strokes of the characters were not compatible. But some have names that do not sound right, for example, Tan Mah Tee, Lau Sai Chwee or Yao Siew Neo (all these names are fictitious, *jagan marah!*) so they have to change them!

You can change your name legally and be known by another name thereafter, but your family may still call you by your family ranking or nicknames. For example, si Baba (elder brother), si Teh Sar (the third child), or si Punggot (the adopted one). Sometimes for the worse, like si Taik Hidong Asin (the stingy one),

si Kenching Papan (the repetitious one) or for the better, si Chantek (the pretty one), si Ho Miah (the fortunate one) and if you are rich and charitable, si Chay Suah!

A gentleman once had his name changed by a Deed Poll to Burok and after years of study he became a lawyer, hence he really became a lawyer *burok!* *

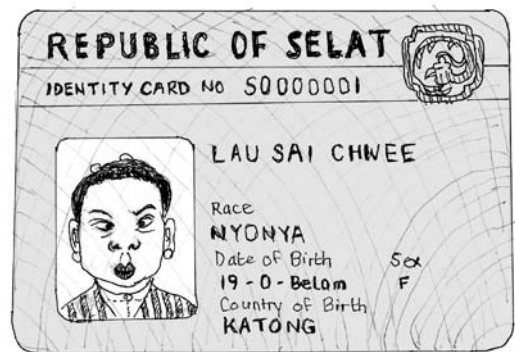


Illustration by Peter Lee.

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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Portrait of a Lady c.1890
Malaysia (Penang)
Oil on Canvas
63.5cm x 50.5cm
Collection of NUS Museum.



DRESSING THE BABA

Suraendhiran s/o Ramadass introduces the latest exhibition at NUS Baba House

The exhibition *Dressing the Baba* features a selection of portraits produced from the late 19th to the early 20th century drawn from recent donations made to NUS Museum's Straits Chinese collection. The donations were made by Agnes Tan, in memory of her father Tun Tan Cheng Lock, Wee Lin (whose former family residence is now the NUS Baba House); Winston Tan and Melvin Tan (descendants of philanthropist Tan Kim Seng); and Peter Lee (honorary curator of Baba House, who assembled this group of paintings for NUS Museum). It is an exhibition to be held at the Museum until the latter half of 2013.

The portraits on display range from oils, ink on paper, to coloured photographs. They were gathered from sources in Java, Malacca, Penang and Singapore. The majority of the subjects are of ethnic Chinese descent and the exhibition traces their change in costume choices over time – from traditional Chinese to a hybrid of Chinese and Western fashions. This transition is most evident in the male subjects who parted with the traditional Chinese long gown in favour of the Western suit.

Anecdotes from the *Malaya Tribune* and *Straits Echo* newspapers complement the display of portraits and highlight various perceptions of the modern Chinese girl and her fashion preferences. Issues pertaining to hairstyle such as 'To bob or not to bob?' present a light read and ties in with the overall theme of *Dressing the Baba*.

Also on display are outfits such as the *baju panjang* and *sarong*, and accoutrements such as *kerosang* brooches and *chochok Sanggol* (hairpins). These artefacts encourage visitors to make connections between the various objects on display and the portraits.



The gallery of portraits at the exhibition.

Portrait of Wee Boon Teck
c. 1880, Singapore
Graphite on Paper,
66.5 x 44 cm
Collection of NUS Museum.

On the whole, *Dressing the Baba* presents portraits that furnish a wealth of details for the scrutiny of dressing and is accompanied by relevant artefacts and anecdotes. Amongst the various interesting details depicted in the portraits, include the Mandarin-collared shirt, Homburg hat and leather pumps worn by Wee Boon Teck. This hybridity in outfit provides a conversational point about fashion, gender, class and modernity during that period. *

Suraen is an Arts Management student at LASALLE College of the Arts. He is currently doing an internship at NUS Museum.

CHAKAP CHAKAP

BEING CHINESE AT HOME

Ronald G Knapp, author of a new book, *The Peranakan Chinese Home: Art and Culture in Daily Life*, shares his thoughts about the Peranakans and their houses.



Author Ronald Knapp.

What drew you to the architecture of domestic houses of the Chinese in Southeast Asia?

My interest in Chinese houses within China goes back to field work in Taiwan in 1965-66 and has continued over the past four decades through research and many books that have taken different approaches to Chinese houses, homes and families. Seeds of ideas in one book often led to expansion in another book. Indeed, my latest book *The Peranakan Chinese Home: Art and Culture in Daily Life* exemplifies this since it is the latest episode in an intellectual journey of discovery. Let me explain.

Although I had lived in Singapore for a year as a visiting

professor at Nanyang University in 1971-72, travelling widely through Malaysia, it never occurred to me at the time that there was anything that one would call a 'Chinese house' in the region. And during that time, I don't believe I ever heard the word 'Peranakan'! For many reasons, my field research and writing subsequently focused on China exclusively. After an absence of 35 years from Southeast Asia, I have now had a chance to recalibrate my research interests as I've become seriously interested in the material culture, including architecture, of this region, which has been so important in the Chinese diaspora.

After completing a successful book focusing on my favorite houses in China in 2005 for Periplus/Tuttle in Singapore,



Although narrower than many reception halls in larger residences, the one dominating the headquarters of the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (Peranakan Chinese Association of Malacca) on Heeren Street nonetheless maintains similar characteristics, with a mixture of Chinese and European furniture. Above the altar, the two characters *yi qi* translate as 'righteousness', which epitomises the character of Guan Gong.

Eric Oey, the publisher, asked me if I would consider working on a book on Chinese houses in Southeast Asia. At the time, this struck me as a rather odd topic. Indeed, I had never ever considered that there were 'Chinese houses outside of China' and certainly hadn't seen any when I lived in Singapore some three decades before. Still, I carried out some preliminary archival research once Eric brought up the topic and indeed found photographic evidence of typical Chinese residences in many areas of the region. The issue, of course, was whether any of these were still standing and what tales could be told of them.

I was very fortunate that A. Chester Ong, a well-known photographer who began to collaborate with me in 2003, agreed to join the project since the visual dimension of these projects is so critical. As Chester and I scoped out how we would approach the topic, the Periplus team in Singapore arranged for us to meet some owners of historic homes in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Our initial objective was relatively modest, that is, finding and documenting some twenty old Chinese-style residences built between the late 18th and early 20th century. While we both were somewhat anxious about getting access to these homes, we were pleasantly surprised that owners were very generous with their time, often bringing out records and old photographs that helped move the project along. Some owners and others interested in local history introduced us to others. As a result, the project grew. After three long and productive trips, we realised we had documented some eighty homes, some of which were hidden behind high walls and never photographed. Nearly 40 of these are featured in our book, doubling our original plan.

What were your impressions of these houses?

Some of the homes featured in our books had been transformed into museums, businesses or hotels. Others are still maintained as residences by descendants who have great pride in their ancestry. We were very fortunate to visit and photograph Singapore's NUS Baba House both during and after restoration, our first foray into an old home. The assistance of Jean Wee (who was then managing the house) and Peter Lee (its honorary curator) helped us understand not only the challenges and expense of restoration but also the extent to which research was necessary to answer key questions. Unraveling the past is not easy, but is critical if one is to appropriately furnish and interpret an old home.

Singapore's Baba House is a gem as are the terrace residences and shophouses in Joo Chiat and Emerald Hill, but we also came to enjoy residences elsewhere throughout Singapore. Singapore is fortunate also to have the Peranakan Museum, which is able to contextualise the social and economic circumstances that brought about the formation of the striking hybrid cultures of the region involving indigenous peoples with immigrants.

In Malacca and Penang, which abound with shophouses, some of which are maintained well, we were fortunate to meet many who cherish their old residences and marvel at the creative ways to maintain them for others to enjoy. Especially notable were the ancestral residences of Tan Cheng Lock and Chee Jin Siew as well as the home of Cedric Tan. While we were impressed by Malacca's Baba Nyonya

Heritage Museum, we regret that we were unable to get permission to do any photography there. In Penang, the sumptuous Pinang Peranakan Mansion, while no longer the residence of a Peranakan personage, today houses a rich collection of Peranakan Chinese artifacts.

Going beyond the better-known Straits Settlements to Phuket in Thailand as well as towns throughout Sumatra and Java in Indonesia, brought into sharper focus the extensive trading networks of Peranakan and non-Peranakan Chinese during the British and Dutch colonial periods. The residence of Tjong A Fie in Medan on the island of Sumatra stands out as an excellent example, but smaller and less lavish homes found in coastal towns are important as well. Chinese-style residences along the coast of Java from Tangerang in the west through Semarang, Surabaya and Pasuruan



Whether moulded in porcelain or stucco, or painted on a wall, the peculiar citron called 'Buddha's hand' or foshou resembles the contorted hands of an old man. It has a homophonous relationship with fu and shou, 'good fortune' and 'longevity'. Fascinating details of Peranakan house interiors can be found aplenty in this new book.

in the east, as well in the interior such as Parakan and Salitiga, among many others, were eye-opening as we came to appreciate the replication of Chinese cultural patterns in the adopted homelands of immigrants. Given the geographic scope of Indonesia, we regret not exploring outer islands such as Sulawesi but also ones closer to Singapore and Malaysia, like Bangka.

And, of course, the linkages between these Southeast Asian locations and sites of production in Europe, China and even North America underscore the globalised spread of material culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a subject that is still not well understood. For me, digging into archives to understand the circumstances of social, economic and geographic conditions in the past was very interesting, as it was to link these circumstances to actual



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they have taught me humility,
the obligation, to never sleep on my laurels,
and the necessity to understand the failures of other people
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family histories. In some cases, old homes were rather derelict, but there is hope that they will be restored and adaptively reused.

How did they conform to, or undermine, the traditional architectural principles of a Chinese house?

While residences all over the world share some common characteristics, there are some specific cultural differences. With houses in China, the presence of adjacent open/closed spaces, which are generally called “courtyards,” the hierarchical organisation of space, as well as the prominence of a room for altars are all fundamentally significant elements. These elements figure prominently in the structures built by Chinese — Peranakan and non-Peranakan — in Southeast Asia.

Beyond the organisation of space, the rich symbolic vocabulary that adorns the inside and outside of Chinese homes is very important in distinguishing these homes from others elsewhere in the world. This is because the symbolic vocabulary communicates broadly accepted Chinese cultural values as well as the hopeful aspirations of individual families in myriad ways. Auspicious imagery constitutes one of the deepest and most enduring traditions of Chinese visual culture in that it traverses class, wealth, education and place. A long chapter in *The Peranakan Chinese Home* reveals this quite clearly with abundant illustrations. No other book dealing with Chinese homes in the region explores this topic in such detail.

What are your overall impressions of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, and what place do you think it has in Chinese studies overall?

At the outset, it is important to recognise that anything described as ‘Chinese’ — even within China itself — exists in many variations, variations on a theme, so to speak. Moreover, in the two provinces — Fujian and

Guangdong — that have sent the greatest number of migrants to Southeast Asia, there are significant cultural variations even from county to county.

Most scholars who study China have limited knowledge of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, indeed the Chinese diaspora generally. This is due largely to the fact that there is comparatively little focus on the Fujian and Guangdong regions in China’s southeast, which is often deemed as

peripheral to the main theaters of Chinese history in the great metropolitan regions of central and northern China. I rarely encounter a scholar of Chinese studies who has even heard of the words ‘Peranakan Chinese’ and thus have no clue to the vibrancy of their eclectic culture and significance in the historical narrative of Southeast Asia.

No scholar has done more to conceptualise the linkages between Chinese history and the patterns of Chinese emigration to Southeast Asia than Wang Gungwu at the National University of Singapore. I have learned a great deal from his work.

Do you have a favourite house and a favourite regional style? Or even a favourite object?

It is not possible to identify a favourite house, but it is easy for me to state my favourite regional style. Over the years, I’ve come to appreciate most the residences found in southeastern China, mainly Fujian and Guangdong but extending also to adjacent areas of Zhejiang, Anhui, and Jiangxi. I also must admit that I am most interested in rural dwellings, those found in villages and small towns rather than those in cities. That these

vernacular traditions travelled to Southeast Asia kindled my interest in pursuing research in the Nanyang region populated by entrepreneurial Chinese immigrants.

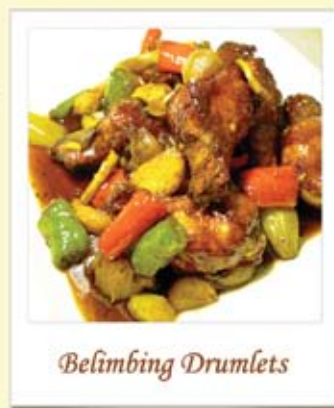
While such sprawling residences no longer stand in Singapore, with the exception of that of Tan Yeok Nee, there are many throughout Indonesia, glimpses of which can be seen in our Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia. Of course, photographic evidence reveals that some Chinese in the past actually built houses that were



This densely carved European-style marble-topped console, which is supported by a single leg and has a mirror above it, hugs the wall in the upstairs parlour of the Tjong A Fie Mansion.



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The magnificent entry hall in the Tjong A Fie Mansion leads to a room-width four-panel screen with gilded carvings and lattice panels. Beyond is the courtyard. An early twentieth century photograph reveals that the room was once furnished with parallel rows of blackwood chair and table sets in addition to a round table with stools in the center. Embroidered wall hangings once ran the length of the room. The mansion is located at Jalan Kesawan Square, Medan, Indonesia

essentially the same as those built in villages in Fujian and Guangdong. Labourers and material were brought from China to the building sites in Southeast Asia, but there is little concrete information of how this occurred. In addition, of course, old shophouses of many types were built throughout the region in many forms that express not only the times in which they were built but also the complementarity of Chinese family life and business activities.

I always am impressed when I see that a family continues to maintain an ancestral residence that was built hundreds of years ago. While there are countless smaller examples, an especially fine example is the Tjong A Fie Mansion. Private conservation is not easy, since such houses require constant maintenance and often very expensive intervention to forestall deterioration. The adaptive reuse of old dwellings has given many structures a second life, not only saving them from the wrecking ball but also providing opportunities for bringing to life again forms and details that might otherwise have been lost. Yet, there are substantial challenges in ensuring an income stream that will assure future needs.

Then, of course, there is the comprehensive – and expensive – restoration of an old home, such as the transformation of the Wee family residence in Singapore to become the NUS Baba House, a generous gift from Miss Agnes Tan to the National University of Singapore. This was an exemplary work of both conservation and restoration involving a range of specialists as well as talented craftsmen. It complements well Singapore's Peranakan Museum.

How does your new book differ from the earlier book?

While our new book *The Peranakan Chinese Home* in many ways resembles our 2010 book *Chinese Houses of Southeast Asia*, a careful reader will see striking differences in both approach and scope of the narrative. The most significant is that Peranakan material culture – objects – is emphasised more than architectural features. Thus, collectors as well as those who have inherited possessions from their forebears will find much of interest. We are grateful to Singapore's Peranakan Museum as well as private

collectors who were generous in providing access to photograph these objects. The long 'Symbols and Iconography' chapter also should help readers look at objects in new and more sophisticated ways. Moreover, *The Peranakan Chinese Home* takes an explicitly comparative approach, rather than

"The rich symbolic vocabulary that adorns the inside and outside of Chinese homes is very important in distinguishing these homes from others elsewhere in the world. This is because the symbolic vocabulary communicates broadly accepted Chinese cultural values as well as the hopeful aspirations of individual families in myriad ways."

the episodic house-by-house approach of our earlier book, in order to focus on generalisations that help illuminate similarities and differences. Inspired by the organisation of Peter Lee and Jennifer Chen's fine 2006 book *The Straits Chinese House: Domestic Life and Traditions*, which updated their 1998 book *Rumah Baba: Life in a Peranakan House*, I decided to take a similar room-by-room view of Peranakan homes so that comparisons would be more explicit because of the juxtaposition of images and text. Moreover, this new book expands the geographic scope beyond Malacca, Singapore, and Penang to other areas occupied by Peranakan Chinese, especially Indonesia and Thailand. ✱

All photographs by A. Chester Ong. Images courtesy of Tuttle Publishing.



DALAM DAPOR

Babi Baba

What can be more Chinese about the Peranakans than their love of pork? Baba Peter Lee compiles pork recipes from some babi-loving chefs.

Babi (pork) is to Peranakan cooking what olive oil and tomatoes are to Italian cuisine. True-blue Peranakan food is manifestly lard-infested, lurking in many dishes, somewhere, somehow, when you least expect it! It is its heart and soul, and perhaps represents what some would consider the most Chinese aspect of this hybrid culinary tradition. Babas go wild like a *babi buta* at the very sight of pork! Naturally, many of the pork recipes in Peranakan cooking are also more 'Chinese' in nature, but many were perhaps invented or improvised in the tropical Dutch colonies, perhaps several centuries ago, and their origins and the meanings of the names of the dishes are lost in time. The *pongteh* of the classic *babi pongteh*, for example, has no known meaning. The *sioh* of *itek sioh* is similarly mysterious. Then there is that reviving home remedy and tonic, a pork, liver and kidney soup known as *charbek*; but what the pork does *charbek* mean? From the murky depths of the history of pork in Peranakan cooking, I have found a couple of amusing recipes from an old Indies cookbook, printed in Batavia (Jakarta) in 1845. One dish also has a name that sounds Hokkien, but whose meaning is obscure — *chicho* (or *tijetjo* in Dutch spelling), and the recipe is reminiscent of our *babi satay goreng* (fried pork satay). There are no quantities in the recipes, and it is anyone's guess what the dish could look or taste like. The Betawi Malay it is written in, is quaint, charming, and also highly amusing.

No guesswork is needed, however, for the recipes from chefs Sylvia Tan, Philip Chia and Bebe Seet, who share their favourite *babilicious* dishes. What better way to celebrate the New Year season than a pork-fest? May the Lard be with you!



Pork recipes from *Kitab Masak Masakan India — Indisch Koekboek* (Indies Cookbook), Lange and Co., Batavia, 1845.

Masak Babie seperti orang Tjiena

Dia poenja babi mestie die tjoetjie bresie doelo, dan kaloe soeda bresie, reboes sama dia baik baik; — kaloe soeda reboes, toemies bawang mera, bawang poetie dan djae, tapie doelo miestie toemboek aloes, abies taro lada, tapie boekan lada aloes, tjengke boelat boelat, dan kembang pala, toemies inie sama sekalie: kaloe soeda kaliatan mera, taro itoe daging sama sama dia poenja aijer; abies peras sedikit djerok tiepies, dan lantans miestie toetoe baik baik sekalie.

To cook pork like the Chinese

The pork must first be washed clean, and when it is clean, it has to be boiled; once it has been boiled, fry the red onion, garlic and ginger, but first these have to be pounded finely, then add pepper — but not the fine peppers cloves, and nutmeg, and fry the mixture together. When the mixture becomes browned, add the meat and the water, then squeeze some lime, and cover firmly [till cooked].

Tjietjo

Potong potong doelo itoe babie, dan lantans taro dalam satoe kwalie; — kaloe soeda, gilieng lada dan koejiet, taro bawang mera njang soeda die ieries ieries, sere, daoen djerok peoroet, aijer santan, djerok tiepies dan garam; — kaloe soeda, miestie masak sampe djadie kental sekalie.

Chicho

First cut up the pork, then place it in a wok, then grind pepper and fresh turmeric [on a stone], add sliced red onions, lemongrass, lime leaves, coconut milk, lime juice and salt. Cook until thick.

Philip Chia's Babi Tohay

“My family and I basically like almost every Peranakan pork dish but *babi tohay* is our favourite as it has a lot of thinly sliced aromatic ingredients, such as *seray* (lemongrass), garlic and shallots, and not forgetting the *daon lemo perot* (kaffir lime leaves).

What is unique about this dish is the way the *grago* or small shrimp is fermented with toasted uncooked rice, toasted sea salt, *angkak* (red rice yeast) and brandy. It has to be fermented for between five to seven days before use.

This recipe was taught to me by a very good friend, Uncle Kim Guan, a great Peranakan cook. He shared this recipe with me during my first visit to Katong Antique House, when I was still in the army.

In my research on this dish, I realised that this dish is, in a way, perfectly balanced. *Angkak*, is apparently a natural statin that reduces cholesterol, which together with the *seray* and garlic, may act to balance the fattiness of the pork belly. It has a great taste too! A lot of young Peranakans have never heard or tasted this dish and it has become long-lost and forgotten.”

BABI TOHAY

(serves 4-6 people)

Ingredients

- 3 tbsp cooking oil
- 1 tbsp ground garlic
- 2-3 tbsp *tohay* paste (see recipe below)
- 15 *daon lemo perot* (kaffir lime leaves)
- 2 strips pork belly, or you can mix pork belly with lean pork, and slice not too thinly (boiled for 30 minutes). Remove meat, allow to cool, slice 0.5-1cm thick
- Pork stock (set aside from the boiled pork)
- 4 stalks *seray* (lemongrass), sliced thinly and fried
- 20 shallots, cut thinly and fried
- 20 garlic, cut thinly and fried
- 2 fresh red chillies, sliced
- 2 fresh green chillies, sliced

Method

Stir-fry the ground garlic in a frying pan for one to two minutes, then add the *tohay* with the *daon lemo perot*. Add the sliced boiled pork and some of the pork



Babi Tohay.

stock. Simmer for five minutes with half of the fried lemongrass, shallots and ground garlic till you get the aroma. Lastly, add the cut fresh chillies and garnish it with the remaining fried shallots, garlic and lemongrass, and serve.

TOHAY

Ingredients

- 250g *grago* (tiny plankton shrimp)
- 50g uncooked rice (fry till very light brown, then let cool)
- 25g sea salt (fry till very light brown, then let cool)
- 20g *angkak* or red rice yeast (fry for one minute then let cool)
- 3 tsp brandy
- 1 tsp sugar

Method

Individually pound the *grago*, rice, sea salt and *angkak* and then mix them all into a porcelain or glass bowl. Add brandy and sugar, and stir well. Transfer the contents into a glass bottle and ferment for a minimum of five days, shaking the bottle three times a day.

Philip Chia prepares tohay to order at \$20 a bottle. Please contact him at 9099 6563 or email philip@rice.sg. Recipe adapted from Philip Chia's recent cookbook, Peranakan Heritage Cooking, Marshall Cavendish, 2012.

Bebe Seet's Tulang Babi Masak Garam Asam Timun

“Babi Masak Garam Asam Timun (pork and cucumber in *garam asam* sauce) is a comfort dish that I grew up eating often at home. We had an aunt who ran a vegetable business in the 1950s who frequently gave us loads of cucumber, which made my mother concoct various ways of serving it. Mother used to cook with fatty *samchan* (belly pork), but I prefer the leaner cut of ribs. I love the spicy, tangy *garam asam* taste in the ribs combined with cucumber and it is a simple one-dish of meat and vegetable.”

TULANG BABI MASAK GARAM ASAM TIMUN

(serves 10 people)

Ingredients

5-6 tbsp cooking oil

Garam asam spice paste or *rempah* (see recipe below)

2kg meaty baby-back pork ribs, cut into 5cm lengths, washed and set aside

8 cucumbers, washed, quartered, and cut into 5cm lengths with skin in tact

Asam water, comprising 100g *asam* (tamarind) in 2 litres water, strained of pulp

Salt to taste

Method

Heat the *kuali* or wok. Add oil. Add *rempah* and *tumis* (stir slowly and fry) until oil separates from the paste and is fragrant. Add pork ribs and stir-fry until meat changes colour, sprinkling *asam* water if it becomes too dry. Add *asam* water and bring to boil. Lower fire and simmer for 15 minutes. Add the cucumbers and continue to simmer till pork ribs are tender. Cucumbers should be soft but firm,



Tulang Babi Masak Garam Asam Timun

and not mushy. Cooking cucumbers can also make the sauce too watery, in which case reduce over the flame, to thicken. Season with salt to taste.

Garam asam spice paste or *rempah*:

Pound in a mortar, or process in a mixer, the following:

8 fresh red chili and 10 dried red chili

8 *buah keras* (candlenut)

5 stalks *seray* (lemongrass)

5 thick slices *lengkuas* (*galangal* or blue ginger)

2 inches *kunyit* (fresh turmeric)

20 shallots

1 thick slice toasted *belachan*

Bebe Seet is the designer and chef at Rumah Bebe. Call 6247 8781 for enquiries.

Sylvia Tan's Babi Asam

“Babi asam is a braised pork dish with tamarind, but the flavours are complex! Yes, there is pork in it, braised till fork-tender, but also spicy and sour notes, as well as an underlying shrimp flavour as it is cooked with shrimp paste or *belachan* as well. A handful of fresh kaffir lime, chili and lemongrass add

an aromatic finish, as do the scattering of fried shallot and garlic. Unlike *babi pongteh*, which is often eaten with just crusty bread and snapped green chilies, *babi asam* is a main course often found on a *tok panjang*. I like it any time, with or without guests!”

BABI ASAM

(serves 6-8)

Ingredients

2 red chilies

1 tbsp *belachan* (shrimp paste)

1 cup shallots

1kg leaner cuts of streaky pork

1 tbsp *tauchio* (salted soya bean paste)

1 stalk *seray* (lemongrass) – use white part only

4-5 *daon lemo perot* (kaffir lime leaves)

2 tbsp *asam* paste (tamarind paste), mixed with 3-4 cups water, then strained of sediment

4 chilies, red and green, cut lengthwise

1 tsp salt

1 tbsp sugar

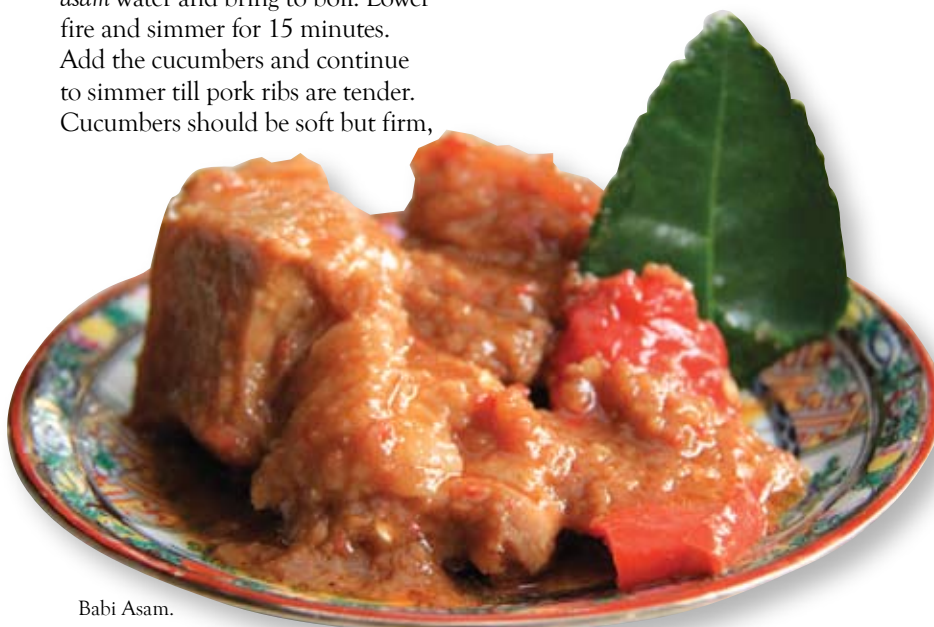
Fried shallots and fried garlic slices (as the garnish)

Method

Process chili, *belachan* and shallots to a paste. Cut pork into chunks. Heat 1 tbsp oil in a pot and brown spice paste, followed by the *tauchio* and finally, the pork. Sprinkle a little water from time to time while browning the spices to prevent burning. Bruise lemongrass with the back of a knife and toss that in, together with the *daon lemo perot*. Add tamarind water and bring pot to the boil, then turn down the fire to simmer till pork is tender. Add slit chilies, season and serve garnished with fried shallots and fried garlic slices. It is best to eat this dish some hours after cooking, to allow the flavours to develop.

Recipe adapted from Sylvia Tan's new cookbook, *Asian Larder: Asian Ingredients DeMystified*, Straits Times Press, 2012.

Food styling and photography by Anton Kilayko.



Babi Asam.

RUMAH

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BOOKS

EMILY GETS A NEW KEBAYA

The fine art of interpreting an iconic figure

Stella Kon's iconic character, Emily of Emerald Hill, has been given life by many actors in numerous productions since the play was written in 1982, 30 years ago. Now, Emily is presented in a fresh version with the script published as a fine art edition with 20 artworks by Kelly Reedy. Limited to 750 copies, the book is co-published by Constellation Books and Landmark Books, and priced at \$120.

Just as a Beethoven symphony can be presented by different orchestras under different conductors, audiences have seen Emily's home at Emerald Hill represented in stage sets lavish or minimalist, realistic or abstract, and Emily performed as larger-than-life, introspective or coy. All these interpretations – and Kelly Reedy's artwork in this book – add to the dialogue between the artists and the script.

The playwright feels privileged to have provided a platform for the creative work of artists in various fields. There is always something to be discovered in the play. Stella said: "I've discussed the motivations and propensities of the various characters, with actors, producers, and students. I came to be able to speak about the characters at length and in detail, but it always felt like I was

just unfolding what was already in the script, not something new about them."

So too the discovery of Emily via the medium of visual arts. Although Kelly Reedy was commissioned to create symbolic images representing specially chosen characters and scenes from the play, she was given artistic space to respond to the play as would a director or actor. Working exclusively in the medium of collage, she combined elements from the different cultural heritages that make up the Peranakan world, including Malay inspired batik fabrics, Chinese traditional paper cuts, as well as references to the British colonial era in which the Peranakan culture thrived.

Kelly, who has lived in Southeast Asia for more than a decade, studied painting and drawing at the University of Wisconsin, USA and at L'Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, France. Her artwork has been shown internationally in Berlin, Paris, Chicago, and, of course Singapore. *

The limited fine art edition of Emily of Emerald Hill, at \$120, may be ordered by writing to Landmark Books at eckheng@landmarkbooks.com.sg.



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MANYAK WAYANG

Baba Richard Tan shares how the Main Wayang Company is speaking, singing and trailblazing Peranakan culture into the new year

2012 has been a year of *main banyak wayang*. Our talents young and old were exposed to a wide variety of audiences! Their infectiously popular and fun interactive segments are fast becoming the entertainment hallmark of The Main Wayang Company! This high energy show format is slowly but surely winning the hearts of audiences locally and overseas and is set to trail-blaze into 2013.

At last year's Singapore Writer's Festival on 6 November 2012, Baba Richard Tan and Nyonya Peggy Ferroa presented a 'Speak Baba Malay' workshop. It turned out to be a most interesting event, attracting a niche group of participants who were genuinely interested in our Peranakan spoken language. Some wanted to reconnect with their roots, while others were curious and wanted to hear how we sounded like! The session overran its two-hour duration, with many requesting for a continuation (and sequels)!

On 24-25 November 2012, The Peranakan Museum invited the Anak Anak Wayang to *buat lao jiat* while educating and entertaining museum visitors with their 'Chakap Baba Patois' and the ever popular 'Sedara Baba Nyonya' songs. That same weekend, The Main Wayang Singers rocked the house over at The 25th Baba Nyonya Convention in The Hatten Hotel Ballroom in Malacca. It was truly a rousing *joget* party that got over 700 delegates and VIP guests on their feet, revelling and having the time of their lives! Datuk Ricky Phua, President of PPCM, joyfully surmised, "*Macham kita punya Baba Nyonya rock concert! Best sekali!*"

And before we could recover from one *joget* party, Gardens by the Bay saw its first-ever Peranakan concert, with The Main Wayang Singers. The heavy downpour could not deter visitors from catching our lively repertoire of Peranakan song and dance! Both 4.40pm and 7.40pm shows were packed. It is such a joy to see performers and audiences in musical harmony, like one big family.

So with a blessed year of the dragon, The Main Wayang Company is most encouraged to continue keeping our performing arts culture even more vibrant as we 'snake' into 2013 with many more new exciting shows, concerts and original Peranakan plays!



Main Wayang Singers at Gardens by the Bay.



Peranakan 'rock concert' at the Baba Convention, Malacca.

Come end February, look out for Baba Desmond Sim's revised version of *The Chair*, an original Peranakan play that traces the many generations of our *singkek* forefathers and how they have assimilated, settling in graciously here to live harmoniously in this place we call home.

Our 'Gua Baba, Lu Nyonya' Children's Interactive Cultural Workshops will go into full swing after the Lunar New Year. We gladly welcome families who would like to introduce their children and rediscover their Peranakan roots. For updates and enquiries, visit our MW website and MW facebook.

An invitation for the Main Wayang Singers to perform in Penang at the forthcoming *Chap Goh Meh* festivity has just been confirmed by The State Chinese (Penang) Association. A fund raising charity concert with a Peranakan theme is currently being planned for mid-May 2013 with our Chempaka (Chetty Melaka Peranakan Association, Singapore) friends. It looks like Main Wayang's calendar for 2013 is going to be activity-packed!

Cheers to our community and culture. Together, *mari kita sama sama* rejoice. "Happy 2013, *huat ah!*" *



Tan Keong Saik
1850 - 1909

THE COLLECTION OF KATONG ANTIQUA HOUSE



Tan Pin Neo (Josephine) 1914- 2010
Granddaughter of Tan Keong Saik
Mother of Baba Peter Wee

Portraits of Tan Keong Saik and Josephine Tan by Alvin Ong, 2012.
Images courtesy of the artist



208 East Coast Road Singapore 428907
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BLAME IT ON THE BABAS AND NYONYAS

The Gunong Sayang Association's (GSA) latest production stays true to its community theatre roots. Baba Emeric Lau reviews this brand-new drama

Nothing quite replaces the comfort or unease that comes with familiarity. It was definitely the former for me and many in the audience at GSA's latest offering, *Makan Nangka Kena Getah* (The Blame Game).

The storyline revolves around long-suffering matriarch, Madam Tay (Jessie Cheang), who had to single-handedly raise her two sons and daughter after her gambling-addicted husband's demise. Her three grown-up children are constantly feuding and matters are exacerbated by a scheming daughter-in-law. Cheang, a veteran of GSA productions, commanded the stage superbly despite being slight of built, arousing much empathy in the recollections of the hardscrabble life her character has led in her conversations with confidant Bongsu (Shirley Tay). Still, there's much humour and comedy, particularly in the form of Lee Yong Ming, who plays Bibik Joan aka Radio, the loud-mouthed gossip prone to malapropisms. All is resolved in the end when Madam Tay's children finally recognise the error of their ways and she receives an unexpected guest who serenades her cares away.

I left the show with a gem of a souvenir – this year's programme booklet, titled *Kamcheng* (Affection) is a beautifully-designed 48-page read featuring articles that highlight interesting nuggets of history and the best of contemporary Peranakan living. Those who do not speak Baba patois would have certainly found the glossary, which lists key terms from the play in English scene-by-scene, most helpful.

Helmed by Babas Tony Quek (Director) and Victor Goh (Playwright / Actor), *Makan Nangka* makes for a delightful evening's entertainment that feels like coming home to the warmth – and drama – of Peranakan family life! *



The *Makan Nangka* cast.

EVENTS

ASPERTINA'S FIRST ANNIVERSARY GALA

Guests were treated to a cavalcade of sound and colours at this year's *Kondangan Peranakan Tionghoa*, a cultural fashion show where leading Indonesian fashion designers showcased their unique takes on traditional Peranakan wedding costumes.



The event was held to commemorate the first anniversary of Asosiasi Peranakan Tionghoa Indonesia (ASPERTINA) or National Peranakan Tionghoa Association, and was attended by about 500 guests. Some of the event's VIP attendees included Mr Purnomo Yusgiantoro the Minister of Defence of Indonesia, Ms Sinta Nuriyah Wahid, wife of the late fourth President of Indonesia, Abdurrahman Wahid, Mr S D Darmono the industrial estate magnate, Mr. Perwata Djunaedi of the Perwata Group, as well as other dignitaries from various cultural organizations and academic institutions.

It was the first Peranakan culture event of its scale to be held in Indonesia and was covered by national television stations, fashion magazines, national newspapers, and numerous online media.

The event was meant to showcase and promote Peranakan fashion and culture among many Indonesians. Event Director, Ms Alexandra Tan describes the event, "From the beginning, we wanted to explore wedding attires with the Peranakan culture heritage as its roots. Because the Peranakan culture is so unique and rich in history it can convincingly provide an option to modern Western style wedding dresses."

As part of the opening ceremony, singer Febe Huang was invited to sing the theme of the once very popular mini-series *The Little Nyonya*. Guests

were then treated to several courses of traditional Peranakan cuisine including *hipio* soup, *gado-gado*, a very special Indonesian salad with a Peranakan touch, as well as *asinan*, pickled vegetables in typical Peranakan style from Bogor. Then, after a final round of rice-cakes, the lavish Peranakan fashion show commenced.

Seven leading fashion designers were involved in the fashion presentation, including Ghea Panggabean, Musa Widyatmojo, Susi Luçon, Deden Siswanto, Jeanny Ang, Rudy Chandra, and Hian Tjien each with their own unique take on the Peranakan wedding attire. The designs that were showcased spanned the extremes of traditional elegance and contemporary daring, yet always keeping with the Peranakan spirit.

The *Kondangan Peranakan Tionghoa* event benefitted stakeholders of the Peranakan

community. Sony Subrata, chairman of ASPERTINA's advisory board that concluded, "We are all very excited to see that ASPERTINA has celebrated its first anniversary by promoting the Peranakan culture in Indonesia. Through this event we are able to encourage stakeholders of the community from the kebaya and batik designers to the Peranakan musicians and historians. We hope that next year more designers will be involved and gradually turn *Kondangan Peranakan Tionghoa* into an annual international Peranakan fashion event." *

Exuberant interpretations of Peranakan fashion were the highlight of the event.



Stylishly presented Peranakan salads and pickles – perfect starters for the dinner.

CELEBRATING THE PAST, DANCING AWAY THE FUTURE

Baba Chan Eng Thai asks some crucial questions in the aftermath of the drinking and dancing at this year's Baba Convention in Malacca.



The pomp and tradition at the convention.

The 25th Baba Convention in Malacca from 23 to 25 November 2012 took stock of the Peranakans' achievements and mapped out how the community might face the future.

The theme of the convention, *Celebrating the Past and Embracing the Future*, was meant to recall the Babas' glorious history. The convention, according to the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM), had 750 delegates present. There were the usual songs, dances and slapstick performances put up by nine Peranakan associations from Melbourne, New South Wales, Phuket, two groups from Indonesia, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and even Kelantan. The Nyonyas were resplendent in their sarong kebayas and the Babas in baju china, while the Baba Malay spoken by some Babas and Nyonyas reflected the shared heritage of the Singapore and Malaccan Peranakans.

contributions of Babas in Malacca. The first tea plantation in Malaya was set up by a Malaccan Baba; the Atlas Ice Company was incorporated by a Baba and has remained a successful family business for over a century! The Malacca High School was also set up by the early Malaccan Babas and the Cheng Hoon Teng Temple still has Babas as its trustees. Banks, workers welfare societies and charitable bodies were initiated by the Babas.

The pomp of a traditional Baba wedding procession led the entrance of the various associations' presidents into the dining hall at the start of the gala. The evening's entertainment provided by Babas and Nyonyas singing and dancing to western and joget music had many hitting the dance floor, and there was even a 'gangnam' twist to the local Malay jingles provided by Singapore's Main Wayang Company. The

delegates were exhilarated and like the spectators in the gladiators' arena, they were baying for more! Song and dance have taken centre-stage and become the highlight of the Baba Conventions. However, the delegates' attendance at the talks during the convention tend to be at the low end, which is a perennial problem that the host association faces at every convention and which may have future conventions relegated to becoming merely an annual dinner and dance event.

What are the challenges facing the Babas in their respective countries? What should the Babas embrace to ensure their existence as a unique

community in the countries which they live? Are the present associations making a concerted effort to inculcate the traditional values of the Babas among the young? These questions were left at the doorsteps of the convention hall, and there they languish.

Hopefully, the 26th Baba Convention in Kuala Lumpur will provide some answers. Otherwise, future conventions may as well be retro-themed dinners sustained by nostalgia. Is this the only way to celebrate Peranakan identity? *



Pantun Terimah Kasih presented to Dato' Seri Khoo.

The delegates of the convention were to intermingle and foster ties of our shared heritage, but each association's delegates sat together in the formal dinner tables allotted to them by the host association. Breakfast and lunch were the opportunities for the delegates to get to know more of each other and have shared meals, yet most of the associations' members huddled at their own tables.

Madam Irene Huang talked about the past

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WELCOME

A big welcome to our new members:

1. Ms Denise Neoh-Khoo
2. Mr Wesley Neoh-Khoo
3. Ms Evelyn Tan
4. Amendment: (with reference to Issue 4, 2012) Mrs Shauna Lawhorne-Goh

OBITUARY

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

1. Mrs Joyce D'Rozario
2. Ms Elizabeth Tan Hock Neo
3. Amendment: (with reference to Issue 4, 2012) Dr Koh Cheng Geok

We appeal to all members who have not submitted two hard copy passport photos of themselves to please do so in order for the committee to produce your membership cards.

All members are to ensure that the Association is kept updated of all their contact details, including email, mailing address and telephone numbers. Please contact Mrs Lim Geok Huay at 62550704 or email geok@peranakan.org.sg.



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MUSEUMS

Peranakan Museum.

See the world's first national Peranakan Museum with the most comprehensive and finest collection of Peranakan artefacts. The 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.



Emily of Emerald Hill: Singaporean Identity on Stage.

Featuring the iconic play by Stella Kon, the exhibition looks at its milieu and background in Peranakan culture and theatre, as well as its

impact on the Singapore art scene. On display are original costumes, props and other stage artefacts, which together aim to present a fresh and original perspective on Peranakan heritage and its national influence. From 1 June 2012 to 17 February 2013.

National Museum of Singapore. The museum's Singapore History Gallery pays tribute to the contributions of the pioneering Peranakans. On view are some outstanding artefacts, including the oil portrait of Lim Boon Keng, old photographs, jewellery and sreh sets, as well as the magnificent carved wood hearse of Tan Jiak Kim, which is considered one of the 11 Treasures of the National Museum. National Museum of Singapore, 93 Stamford Road, Tel: 63323659, Opening Hours: 10am to 6pm Daily (Singapore History Gallery), 10am to 9pm Daily (Singapore Living Galleries), Admission \$10 (adults), \$5 (senior citizens above 60), \$5 (students, Nsmen), Free admission to the Singapore Living Galleries from 6pm to 9pm. <http://nationalmuseum.sg>.



Baba House. This heritage house goes back in time to 1928. Experience what a grand Peranakan terraced house would have been like. Formerly owned by the Wee family (whose ancestor Wee Bin was a mid-19th century

shipping magnate) since 1910. 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>

Dressing the Baba: Recent Donations of Portraits. This exhibition features a selection of late 19th to early 20th century

portraits of ethnic Chinese individuals and couples from Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. As recent donations, the display surveys portraiture, its functions, and ideas it may convey. Significant to such enquiry is the projection of identities informed by gender, ethnicity and economic status, and the conventions of portrait



making that facilitate such projections. Presented at NUS Baba House, formerly a Peranakan residence, the exhibition complements ways of encountering the cultural histories of the regional Peranakan communities, explored through portraits and their proposed contexts. From 5 December 2012 to 31 July 2013. Please call to arrange visits.

Asian Civilisations Museum. The first museum in the region to display a wide range of artefacts from across Asia, the ACM not surprisingly has some important Peranakan treasures. The Mary and Philbert Chin Gallery has some lavish examples of gold jewellery, *sreh* boxes and other paraphernalia, some encrusted with diamonds, and fine batik textiles from the north coast of Java, all made for the Peranakan market.

1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555, Tel: 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>

Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall

The old Sun Yat Sen Villa reopened in October 2011 after extensive renovations with a new name.



Fitting tribute is given to the former owners of the house, especially Teo Eng Hock, a son of Teo Lee, one of the pioneer Teochew merchants in Singapore, together with his nephew Lim Nee Soon, were among the loyal supporters of Sun Yat Sen's bid to overthrow the Qing government. The exhibition shows how Singapore, and the Chinese community here played an important part in this pivotal moment of world history. Intimate photos of family life, and of Teo Eng Hock's nyonya mother, Mrs Teo Lee née Tan Poh Neo (granddaughter of the kapitan of Muntok), add charm and a Peranakan angle to the experience. 12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874, Tel: 6256 7377, Opening Hours: 10am-5pm daily. Website: wanqingyuan.org.sg.

LANDMARKS

Blair Plain. A typical Peranakan residential area around Spottiswoode Park, Blair Road and Neil Road which is worth a stroll. Visit Guan Antiques nearby at Kampong Bahru Road, a treasure trove of Peranakan heirlooms. <http://www.arch.nus.edu.sg/>

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

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. Also <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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