



# the peranakan

ISSUE 3 • 2013



**SIMPAN! SIMPAN! SIMPAN!**  
**KEEP ON COLLECTING!**

| Into the  
Looking Glass

| Heritage  
Walls

| Wartime  
Memories

| Pint-sized  
Porcelain

| Classy  
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## Foundation Jewellers

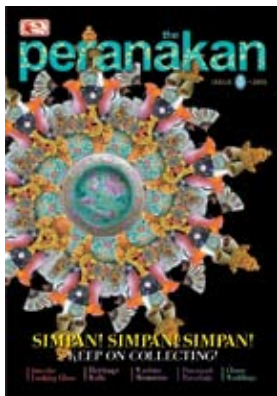
FINE PERANAKAN DESIGN

With more than 30 years of history in the jewellery trade, Foundation Jewellers was first established as a goldsmith shop located in the Joo Chiat area during the bustling 1970s. We are the specialist in recreating fine traditional Peranakan Jewellery in Singapore, fully handcrafted to perfection by the few remaining Peranakan jewellery craftmasters in Asia.

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Cover : A kaleidoscope of collectibles.



THE  
PERANAKAN  
ASSOCIATION  
SINGAPORE

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# Straits Chinese Jewellery MUSEUM

Peranakan Jewellery is fascinating and mesmerizing, embracing the cultures and history surrounding it. Chinese, Malay and Indo-European form, design and motifs are featured in the jewellery, sometimes all of these in one singular piece.

Jewellery, worn and loved by the Peranakan Chinese Nyonya women are usually fashioned using diamonds, intan, rubies, sapphires, pearls and jade. These are radiantly set in gold, silver or sausa.

The halcyon days of Peranakan jewellery is surrounded by beauty and wealth. Individual pieces are skillfully crafted to highlight the beauty of the design, and enhancing the comeliness of the nyonya. It gives as much pleasure to the owner as serving to delight the audience. The jewel collection of the nyonya also reflects on her family's wealth and status.

The timeless beauty of these exquisite, rare and treasured pieces, each item with its own secrets and story, is once again paraded in all its extravagance at the Straits Chinese Jewellery Museum.

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# ABOUT COLLECTING AND COLLECTIBLES

Honestly. You can easily walk past any of our featured collectors and not realise that they have a shared passion for extraordinary, and ordinary, things. They look no different from you and me.

But they are different. Collectors, generally, are by nature curious, acquisitive, cumulative and patient - extremely patient. Some hoard heedlessly and mindlessly. Others hoard but manage to maintain a focus. Yet others nurse their passions like a glass of fine wine.

Which type a collector is really does not matter. What counts to almost all serious collectors is the satisfaction and pleasure they derive not just from the hunt but also from completing a particular collection, if ever there is such a thing as a completed collection.

Lady Luck plays a big role in this.

Take Baba Victor Lim for instance. It was not until some time this year that he was able to find a long missing tile in March to complete a five-piece Peranakan tableau of a peacock that he started 20 years ago. And he still has several uncompleted tableaux waiting to be finished like jig saw puzzles.

And there is Baba William Gwee who was lucky to have collected much during the war even as a boy. His vivid memories of those years bring to life innocuous and seemingly uninteresting mementoes. Items like a simple receipt his father received from his Japanese manager for items received as the war drew to a close tell intimate stories of a moment in time.

We also have Baba Louis Chan who became interested in all things old from the age of eight because he was lucky enough to have a *Tua Ee* who brought home family treasures to fire his passion.

What kind of fires can possibly light up such passions and keep them burning? For many it is a sudden enthralling encounter with beauty; for some others it is a remembrance of things past or bringing home pieces of nostalgia; yet for others, it is simply an in-born habit of keeping things and not wanting to throw them away. For some too, this same fascination has become a way to make a living.

In this edition of the magazine, we also feature some unusual finds by entrepreneurs who are themselves serious collectors or who became collectors because of the business. There is Patrick Phoa who collects pre-war hand-blown or moulded glass vases; Elizabeth Tng who collects old trinkets; Ng Ah Choon who has an eye for the unusual;

and Susan Tan, whose passion is heritage jewellery for everyday use or special occasions.

In this edition too we report on two Peranakan weddings celebrated in two Malaysian towns last year; our Peranakan Museum's second international travelling exhibition - this time to South Korea; an interview with the Chan family which is revamping its pioneering Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum in Malacca; recipes from private chef Baba Stephen Koh; and a review of Nyonya Josephine Chia's very readable new book - *Kampung Spirit*.

But most of all, folks, do look out for our Association's event of the year just round the corner - The Peranakan Ball 2013, themed "*Laok Embok Embok*" - on Friday, 26 July 2013, at the Concorde Hotel, Orchard Road! ❄

Colin Chee

Guest Editor for Issue 3, 2013

THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION SINGAPORE Presents

**The Peranakan Ball 2013 Laok Embok Embok**

**Friday 26th July 2013**  
**6.30 pm to 12.00 midnight**  
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 Come early and patronise the Ketah Ketik stalls selling all things Peranakan



*Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly. A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot. Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.*

*Proverbs 14:33-34*

*Wisdom rests in the heart of a man of understanding, but it makes itself known even in the midst of fools. Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people*

*Proverbs 14:33-34*

*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of fools pour out folly. The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good. A gentle tongue is a tree of life!*

*Proverbs 15: 1-4*



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## THE COLLECTION OF KATONG ANTIQUE HOUSE



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# OF GLASS DOMES, TINSEL BOUQUETS AND ALL THINGS LOVELY

Baba Colin Chee discovers the wonderful,  
whimsical world of *gelai tutop*

A private collector who declined to be named gives *The Peranakan* magazine a glimpse of his extensive collection of *Gelai Tutop* (Glass Cover) ornaments that describe stunning ornamental glass domed floral arrangements and shares his knowledge of this collectible with us. A Singaporean whose forebears hail from Penang, he has been seriously collecting Peranakan material culture for close to 20 years, starting with the community's startlingly beautiful pastel coloured ceramics.

"It's been a wonderful journey and we are still on it, he says. "It just evolved gradually as we extended our collection of Peranakan ceramics to other aspects of the community's material culture such as textiles, jewellery and others. When the collection got into furniture we ran out of space. So we built a house, designed around our collection, to accommodate everything."

His intention from the beginning was to conserve, to study and to establish deep dialogues with other serious collectors around a hybrid culture that is both rich and exuberant in its diversity. That focus has not changed.

His collection of intact and pristine *gelai tutop* proved to be a challenge. There are not many around for the simple reason that they were made primarily for a Penang clientele,

*Gelai tutop were usually displayed in the bridal chamber. They are also displayed in other areas of a Peranakan home. Here, a pair of gelai tutop featuring fairies bearing shell basins sandwich an imperial yellow Peranakan vase in front of a brown and gold tall mirror in a family room.*

Photography by Colin Chee



(Right) British glass domes from the Victorian era inspired the Penang Peranakans' *gelai tutop*. Here is a classic example of a typical Victorian glass dome displaying a very colourful arrangement of a bouquet of flowers and foliage in a white vase flanked by two smaller baskets of flowers.

(Below) This *gelai tutop* is one of the largest ever fabricated, standing just over two feet or just over 600 mm in height. The display is a well-balanced arrangement of tinsel birds, bees, and butterflies amidst flowers and rambutans with a sleeping toy tiger on the base.

and usually made in pairs as wedding gifts for the generally wealthier families. The glass domes are made of very thin glass and are extremely fragile which may explain their rarity.

"To the best of my knowledge, you won't find them in Malacca or Singapore," he says. "They are just found in Penang."

He started modestly with only two *gelai tutop* that he bought in Penang more than 10 years ago. After this, he was not able to grow his collection



of *gelai tutops* for a long time.

Then very suddenly, about seven years ago, a large collection of *gelai tutop* came on the market from a single collector in Penang and he acquired it all. In a snap, his *gelai tutop* collection expanded several times over to possibly be one of the largest significant collections of its kind in the region.

"These days, however, we need to be more careful," says our collector. "Because they are rare, vendors are known to cannibalise intact parts of damaged *gelai tutop*, reassembling the parts, and then passing

them on as the real thing."

The Peranakans of Penang had them made locally as wedding gifts. The larger *gelai tutop* were likely professionally crafted in specialty shops, while the smaller ones could be fabricated at home.

The really large ones, as high as two feet or 610 mm, are rare, as are the small ones that can be only three inches or 76 mm in height. The average height of the *gelai tutop* is around one foot or 305 mm. The small ones may be home-made as they largely consist of simple tinsel bouquets given the limited volume space inside the glass domes.

*Gelai tutop* always come in pairs. Like their Chinese forefathers, the Peranakans believe that even numbers are more auspicious than odd ones. Not surprisingly, gifts are given in even numbers for the celebration of all occasions, especially weddings.

The gifts would be displayed in prominent corners of the newlyweds' home, and especially in the bridal chamber.

Because they are made largely from glittery gauze and ribbons, these come alive easily like jewellery when exposed to even the slightest light and lend a grand or ethereal ambience to a well-furnished Peranakan room. To add further interest, arrangements could include representations of animals, birds (even stuffed real birds), flowers, fruits, figurines, and porcelain fairies.

The hand blown glass domes or jars on wooden bases in which the arrangements are displayed were likely imported from Britain. They provide







whereas the newly converted Christian Peranakans would include the images of Jesus and Mary in the *gelai tutop*, all the while retaining their favourite phoenix figures. Perhaps and possibly influenced by their Thai neighbours to the north, the ornate and glittery arrangements they made included miniature porcelain dolls in Thai costumes and are today truly a visual feast.❖

*(Left) A full-bodied display of tinsel flowers. The presence of miniature dolls of clearly Thai court ladies and an elephant suggest a strong Thai influence in the crafting of this particular gelai tutop.*

*(Right) This is probably one of the smallest gelai tutop ever crafted, about three inches or 76 mm in height. It was probably home-made.*

*(Bottom right) This is a stunning gelai tutop with probably a jungle themed display of miniature toy animals such as monkeys.*



a clean and dust free environment for the arrangements placed in them.

This Penang Peranakan tradition of glass domed craft was inspired by British ornamental arrangements endosed in glass domes of the Victorian era, which were themselves adapted from the French *Globe de Mariée*. These French glass domes served as displays for wedding souvenirs, placed prominently in the formal dining room and reached the height of their popularity in the 1850s.

The Victorians incorporated symbolic stuffed birds, wax flowers and leaves into their elaborate arrangements, for example the bird symbolises love; roses, eternal love; lime leaves, fidelity; and oak leaves, strength and longevity of the couple.

The Penang Peranakans' unique glass dome adaptations however have outdone them all. The more traditional Peranakans have Chinese figurines as the centerpiece of the arrangements



# SOME THINGS SMALL

Baba Louis Chan shares with Baba Colin Chee his passion for miniature Peranakan ceramics



Photography by Colin Chee.

Louis Chan is a sixth generation Peranakan who traces his roots to Lim Leack who arrived in Malacca in 1825. He is an in-house lawyer with a multi-national company. Besides collecting ceramics, silver and beadwork, Louis cooks Peranakan food and also has an esoteric collection of cooking utensils used in Peranakan kitchens of long ago. Louis, 41, started collecting from a very young age.

He says: "I was only eight years old when I started my first collection. My *Tua Ee* gave me my great granny's *korek kuping* (hairpins), *kerosangs* for the *baju panjang* (a set of three circular brooches), and granny's *kebayas* (embroidered tops) and that started me off.

"*Tua Ee* used to come to our home every Tuesday to cook. Whenever she came, she would bring little antique things for me to see. By that time she didn't have much left because when we sold off grandpa's family home, we disposed of many of the bigger things like cupboards, furniture and artifacts. So what she had were the smaller remnants. Sadly, this is the story of many Peranakan families at that time."

Louis explained that he had always been interested in things that are old, and things that belong to the family, because each piece tells a story.

"I was also interested in my grandparents and my ancestors, who they were, and what sort of lives they led," he adds.

It was only in secondary school when Louis started to buy things, with pocket money saved from *ang pows* received during the Lunar New Year and birthdays. He was studying in Raffles Institution then and in his free time he would visit the antique and

*The top shelf from left to right are miniature versions of a chupu and kamchangs. The second shelf from left to right are miniature spittoons. The third shelf are cosmetic containers and basins. The bottom shelf from left to right are cosmetic basins.*





coin shops in the Arcade at Raffles Place, River Valley Road and Tanglin Shopping Centre.

At the Arcade he bought his first miniature spittoon, about three inches in height, from a Mrs Lam for a princely sum of \$950. Miniature spittoons were used by *bibiks* who would spit their rusty coloured well-chewed *sireh* into these small containers.

"I went to Mrs Lam's shop many times to gaze at the spittoon. I would go back and forth and then think about it and when I saved up enough, I bought it. This was in the 1980s," Louis recalls with delight. The second spittoon was acquired separately, more than 10 years ago, from one of the antique shops, now closed, in Tanglin Shopping Centre.

He does not know the provenance of the miniature spittoons that he bought. "The dealers wouldn't tell me anyway, in case it embarrassed the seller's family." There are no markings or reign marks on them but you can tell they are old pieces from the quality of the glaze and detailed enamels.

Besides the miniature spittoons, Louis has collected miniature *kamchangs* (lidded jars). These were used as cosmetic jars to store *minyak* (oil) for

one's hair, *obat lida buaya* (aloe vera gel), and *bedak sejok* (facial rice powder).

Louis also inherited several other miniature ceramic pieces, now partly on display in a small teak cupboard, but not many are coloured. There are more of the blue and white variety.

But how did he start collecting miniatures? Louis says matter of factly: "I started this collection by accident. I was never intending to collect them. I just happened to come across them in the shops. They caught my attention and that's how I started."

He continues to collect, but pieces are now a lot more expensive as supply has dried up because families and collectors have suddenly become aware of their heritage as well as intrinsic value.

"The nice ones are now so expensive, and there are also many reproductions in the market that you have to be careful. Beware of paying antique prices for new items masquerading as antiques!"

"Christie's auctions of Peranakan ceramics and jewellery some years back had everyone excited. It has never been the same since. Collectors are now hoarding what they have so the supply that comes onto the market these days is just a trickle." ❄

Baba Louis inherited several miniature blue and white kamchangs from his family.



Small but functional, these miniature spittoons were used by *bibiks* who would spit their chewed *sireh* into them. One of them is Baba Louis' first miniature ceramic acquisition that he bought in the 1980s as a school boy. The second he came across 10 years later. He has not seen any since.



# HERITAGE ON YOUR WALLS

Baba Victor Lim reflects on his collection of decorative Peranakan tiles with Baba Colin Chee

Photography by Colin Chee



(Top) German tiles are beautifully monochromatic with a simple design focus - almost post industrial - with their own unique glaze colours.

(Right) You can usually tell the provenance of these tiles. There are factory and country markings at the back of the tiles. You can also differentiate design and glaze styles. British tiles tend to have translucent glazes with art nouveau designs.

In Southeast Asia, colourful ceramic tiles were popular in the British Straits Settlements of Malacca, Penang and Singapore during the colonial era.

Singapore Peranakan tile catalogues of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century testify to the wealth of many decorative and figurative designs produced during Great Britain's glorious Victorian era.

Many of these tiles are of art nouveau Style characterised by delicate, graceful and sinuous lines with richly colored glazes. They were

produced as stand-alone tiles or as vertical panels for use in entrance porches, hallways, washstands and courtyards. These tiles can still be admired in old houses in Emerald Hill, Ann Siang Hill, Joo Chiat Road, Blair Road, Neil Road and a few of the *lorongs* in Geylang today. These tiles were also used to decorate wooden teak furniture found in Peranakan homes.

Victor Lim, 52, who owns a tile company called Aster by Kyra, says: "During the early 1900s, large quantities of Majolica tiles from





Britain, Belgium and Germany were imported by Tan Soo Hock & Co, A. Clouet & Co and Malcolm, Lyon & Co.

These imports were halted at the outbreak of World War One in 1914. Fewer tiles were imported from Europe after the end of World War One, whereas more tiles bearing patent numbers issued by the Japanese patent office were shipped to Singapore, owing to the shorter distance between Japan and Singapore. Many of these Japanese tiles produced in the 1910s and 1920s featured geometric patterns or auspicious Chinese designs depicting figurines, scripts, fruits, flowers, fish, birds and auspicious creatures.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, pre-war shop-houses, terrace houses and bungalows were demolished to make way for new buildings and infrastructural developments. Many such tiles found in these old buildings ended up in dump heaps.

Passionate about Singapore history since

young, Victor, when in his late 20s, painstakingly searched for such tiles at places where old buildings were being demolished - Jalan Besar, Geylang, Katong, Tanglin, River Valley, Killiney Road, Bishopsgate, Emerald Hill, among others.

He then researched and preserved them for his own collection.

Twenty plus years on, heritage tiles are still Victor's passion. A favourite pastime is to roam around Singapore looking for these tiles. He also has contractor friends who alert him to heritage shophouses and bungalows about to be torn down or renovated so that he can save the tiles.

Showing us a set of six tiles depicting flying birds that he salvaged from a house in Geylang, Victor says: "The owner removed these decorative tiles from the external wall of his shophouse when he was

renovating it and he threw them away. When the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) found out, it insisted the owner restore the tiles. He could not find them, so he employed a few

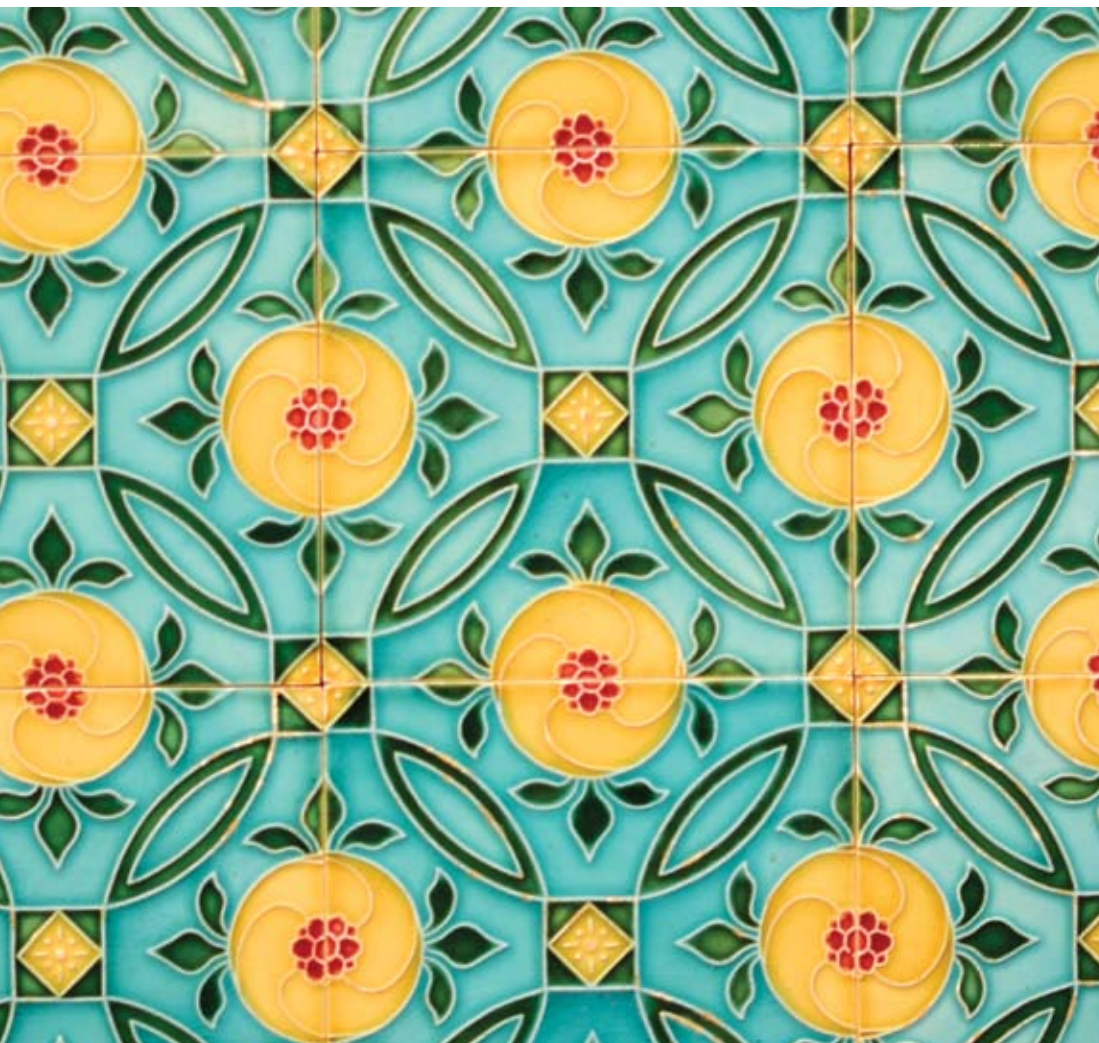
*(Above) These tiles were thrown away by the owner of a shop-house which was being renovated in Geylang, Singapore. He later replicated them by hiring painters from China.*

*(Left) This was Victor's first tile acquisition. Part of a pair, it was manufactured in Britain. He salvaged them from a house in Bishopsgate, Singapore.*

*(Below) Belgian tiles are like their famous and exquisite tapestries and are used to decorate walls with their vibrant colors.*







(Above) Japanese tiles often come in a beautiful and balanced mix of pastel colours and would feature Japanese as well as Chinese motifs. The pattern on the tiles illustrated here is an exquisite geometry of flower motifs.

(Right) This is the five-piece tableau of a peacock that took Baba Victor 20 years to piece together.

Chinese craftsmen to paint and recreate the “tiles” on his external walls where the ceramic tiles used to be.”

The fun of collecting lies not only in the visual aesthetics of the durable beautifully glazed tiles, but also in hunting down “lost” pieces that make up a tableau.

Victor proudly showed us a recently completed five-piece set of a peacock. “This five-piece tableau took me just over 20 years to complete. The first tiles I bought 20 years ago from a junk shop in Singapore. Ten years later I found another one in an antique shop in Malacca. Then five years ago I acquired the fourth tile at a Joo Chiat junk shop. And just two weeks ago I saw and got the final piece in a Serangoon Road junk store.

Some tiles form a picture and you may have to wait and hunt a long time to complete the tableau,” Victor says.

Part of the fun of collecting is also painstakingly restoring badly stained, uncared-for tiles to their original state. Victor puts dirty and chipped tiles through a tedious and strenuous eight-step cleaning process stretching over 12 weeks.

But what emerge from tubs of dirty water and other liquids are gems that look almost as good as when they were new almost 100 years ago.

There are many tile collectors in Singapore. Most who are interested, however, buy them to decorate the walls of their homes, or offices and shops. To them, it is the same as preserving a part of Singapore’s culture. ✱



# A WAR TO REMEMBER

Baba William Gwee relives his vivid memories of the War years with Baba Colin Chee. This article marries a review of Baba William's latest book on his boyhood with his unique collection of World War Two memorabilia

Baba William Gwee, 79, is the consummate storyteller. Wife Rosie says, amused: "He has so many stories I don't know where he gets them from. The minute he steps into the car to the time he steps out, he doesn't run out!"

It's so true! When my wife Linda and I interviewed him for this article, he was unstoppable! It was a challenge trying to rein in his storytelling that just chugged on in a tireless and continuous stream of thought bytes, squiggles, surges and chomps. The good thing is he promised to compress them into snippets for a story-filled issue that the magazine is planning for next year!

William's latest book *A Baba Boyhood* is a fascinating read of his family's wartime experiences. He tells the Singapore story immediately before the war, and on through the three and a half years the Japanese occupied this then-British colony, which became known as *Syonan-to*. He was eight years old when Singapore fell to the Japanese.

In many ways, his historic references match Baba Lee Kip Lee's book of the same period titled *Amber Sands*.

However, Baba William makes an observation in his Introduction to the book that is worth deliberating on from a historical and our community's perspective: "For the Baba

**"For the Baba Peranakan community, the Japanese Occupation drastically changed our cultural ethos forever. As a result of the huge loss of the cream of our menfolk in the infamous Sook Ching massacre, marriages strictly between members of the Baba community became impractical. This, coupled with the emancipation of the Nyonya womenfolk, gravely affected the essence of our culture and identity."**

Peranakan community, the Japanese Occupation drastically changed our cultural ethos forever. As a result of the huge loss of the cream of our menfolk in the infamous *Sook Ching* massacre, marriages strictly between members of the Baba community became impractical. This, coupled with the emancipation of the Nyonya womenfolk, gravely affected the essence of our culture and identity."



(Above) Baba William Gwee at home in Siglap, Singapore.

A receipt given to one of the donors in Singapore and Malaya who had contributed to Dr Lim Boon Keng's futile quest to raise S\$50 million for the Japanese occupiers. "The second punishment exacted on the Chinese involved those in Singapore as well as those in the Malaya peninsula. The Japanese made Dr Lim Boon Keng the president of the Overseas Chinese Association and instructed him to raise \$50 million from the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya to be presented to the Japanese military in atonement for having organized the China Relief Fund. Try as he might, Dr Lim was only able to raise \$28 million, which the Japanese accepted while demanding that he borrow the balance from the Yokohama Specie Bank." – Pg151, *A Baba Boyhood*

In this article, excerpts of the book are reproduced and each is pictorially supported with items from William's unusual and wide collection of World War Two memorabilia.

It is a fascinating collection. Baba William started collecting them when he was a little boy: "These items just came my way, so I *simpan* (kept them), lah. I didn't go out of my way to collect. The Japanese soldiers gave me magazines, caps,





The two sides of a Japanese Army standard issue fan. Fans were given to Japanese soldiers to keep them cool in the tropical heat. The calligraphic writings are exhortations from the Emperor or Prime Minister. "Behind Tua Ko's house (on Devonshire Road) was a bungalow...which had

been requisitioned by the Japanese military for several of their officers to stay. From the upstairs balcony...we had a clear view of the new occupants because the bungalow was situated on elevated land. Without exception, the occupants were bald headed and were perpetually chain-smoking.

They walked clad only in their fundoshi, a loin cloth. We assumed they found the Singapore heat oppressive, which resulted in their near nakedness...and they were often seen cooling themselves with a fan in hand." - Pgs 153-154, A Baba Boyhood.

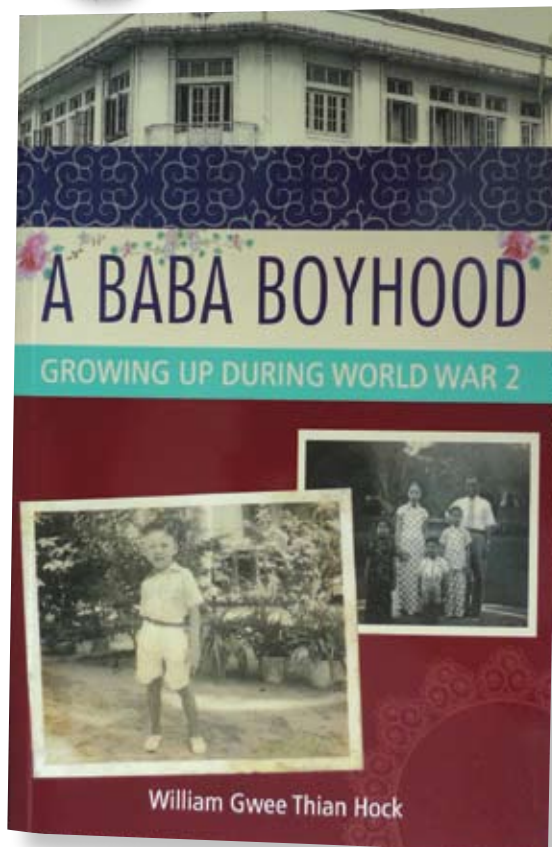
uniforms and lots more. They loved children.

"I actually had much more. But after the war my father said 'Buang! Buang! Throw away!' because the communists were in control for a while before the British consolidated and returned in force. During this period of several weeks, the communists *tangkap* (caught) the collaborators and killed them. My father didn't want to give them any excuses, like having Japanese items in our home.

"Later I started buying some of these items from junk shops, whenever I rediscovered them. But *tak banyak* (not much), lah. Only a few items."

Then pointing to a worn-looking lottery ticket he said: "We even had lotteries during the Occupation. The top prize was \$50,000 in Japanese-issued currency. One day, the *keling* (colloquial reference to a person of Indian ethnicity) news vendor who cycled down our street stopped coming. Rumour was rife that he won the first prize in the Lottery!

"My habit is this: I don't *buang* (throw away) things. I just keep them. That's why I have other collections like the one of old drinking glasses that soft drink manufacturers used to promote their brands - Green Spot, Sinalco, Coca Cola, F&N, and others!" ❄



The cover of William Gwee's latest book, A Baba Boyhood.

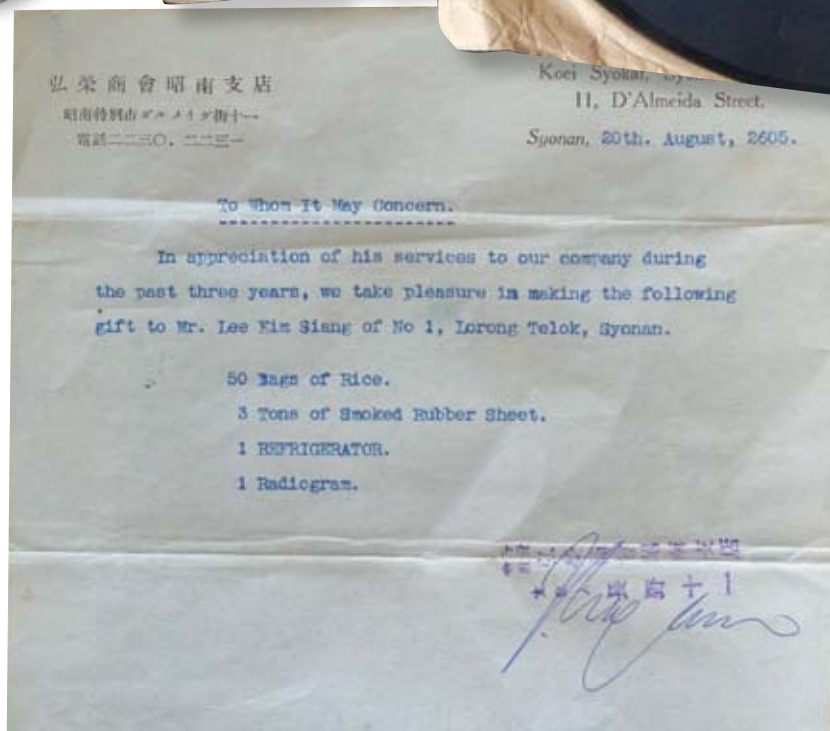




Song sheet and album of Japanese songs during the war years. "Among our classes was a period devoted to singing. Naturally, the songs we were taught to

sing were Japanese and they included nursery rhymes and folk songs, as well as patriotic and martial songs. We found the songs tuneful and easy to remember. A number

of my peers retained the ability to sing part, if not the whole, of these Japanese songs for many years to come." - Pg 169, A Baba Boyhood



Baba William's father's receipt for items given away to staff by Japanese bosses as the war drew to an end. "Around the first quarter of 1945, bizarre rumours began to circulate around Singapore. One of the black-market vendors whispered to Mother that a few days ago someone had seen a dragon in the sky and its cry had sounded

like, "Ai liao, lo!" in the Hokkien dialect, meaning it's over soon.... When Mother drew these unusual rumours to Father's attention, he did not ridicule them. Instead he informed her that something unexpected was taking place in many Japanese-run establishments. The Japanese had taken to giving away food, clothing, bicycles and even cars to their staff. Among

some small items Father was given by Nishiyama were ten gunny sacks of sugar. For the next few months there was a daily stream of friends and so-called relatives, whom I was seeing for the first time, coming to our house requesting for sugar." - Pgs 261-262, A Baba Boyhood

Baba William is a documenter of Peranakan culture and history, writer, storyteller, and collector. He is also the author of Singapore's own Peranakan Dictionary. One of his early out-of-print books, A Nyonya Mosaic - Memoirs Of A Peranakan Childhood, about his beloved mother Seow Leong Neo, was reprinted earlier this year. It was published by Marshall Cavendish, which also launched his latest book titled A Baba Boyhood - Growing Up During World War Two.





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## A TREASURE TROVE OF VINTAGE COLLECTIBLES



*Photograph taken by Mr. Yoon Chong*

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## collectibles for sale

### LARGE GOLD PENDANT

An unusual gold, "cheok kim" in Hokkien, pendant. According to Elizabeth Tng, it is very probably more than a hundred years old. Its provenance is unclear but it has been in the possession of a Singapore family for many years. The pendant weighs 250 gms. Beautifully crafted, it has motifs of a bat for a crown, dragonfly held up by two carps, and what looks like a chrysanthemum flower with insects.

Available from Elizabeth Tng

TIMELESS TREASURE, TEL: 96720713

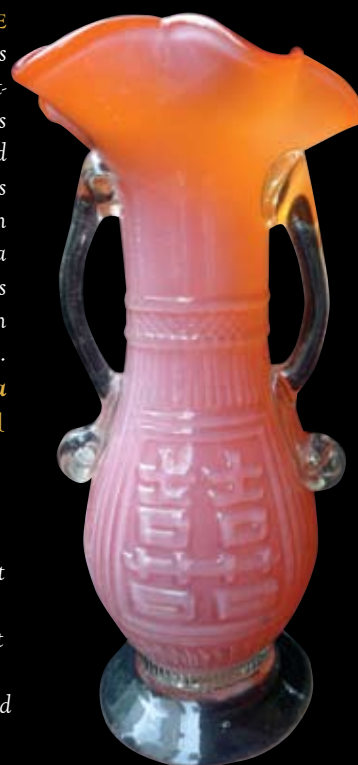


### CHINA MADE GLASS VASE

Patrick Phoa has been collecting these China-made glass vases that were very popular during the pre-war and post-war years. His family owned a few of these colourful vases when he was a child and he never knew what happened to them. When he started collecting, he made sure his runners knew his interest and they would bring him unusual vases whenever they found them. He now has a few hundred of these vases. Here is an unusual red glass vase with the Chinese character for "double happiness" on an art nouveau base design.

Available from Patrick Phoa

THE HERITAGE SHOP, TEL: 96861071



### KEROSANG WITH TWO TYPES OF STONES

This kerosang of clearly Penang origin will be a collector's delight. The three-piece kerosang with an "ibu" and two "anaks" is gilded silver and set in a combination of emeralds and rubies. Kerosangs set with two or more different types of stones are generally uncommon. Susan Tan observed that most kerosangs are usually set with one type of coloured stone: such as intans, or diamonds or batu yacob; or red and pink stones like rubies or red paste; or green stones like emeralds or green paste.

Available from Susan Tan

KIM POH HONG GOLDSMITH, TEL: 65341988



### A PAIR OF 5 INCH OR 127MM GOLD AND SILVER THREAD EMBROIDERED SLIPPERS

Ah Choon acquired this pair of small slip on slippers some years back. He was told they were made especially for burial purposes but he is not sure about that as they are extremely well made. The slippers' insoles are made from fine, but now worn, velvet of violet hue, while the toe covers are made from a pair of beautiful gold silver thread floral embroidery.

Available from Ng Ah Choon

GUAN ANTIQUE, TEL: 98390360

Photography by Colin Chee



# TWO WEDDINGS.





# TWO WORLDS

Kuala Lumpur resident Baba Cedric Tan highlights in this sumptuous and delightful visual spread two seemingly different Peranakan weddings - one celebrated in Klang and the other in Malacca. One was almost as traditional as it could get, and the other – with a touch of the contemporary. Yet both ceremonies drew from the same deep well of our community's cultural rituals, norms and taboos

July last year unexpectedly served up two delightful surprises - two very uniquely different Peranakan weddings held in two different places in West Malaysia and yet sharing many similarities.

Firstly, the modern Peranakan halves of the two bridal couples married non-Chinese partners. This is perhaps not unusual at all given the assimilation of our migrant Chinese forefathers with the local communities of their time. And secondly, the wedding theme of both ceremonies was deliberately Peranakan and held in family homes. This is because the Peranakan halves of the two couples had spent time away from the Peranakan heartlands of Penang and Malacca and wanted to re-embrace their roots.

## BABA ROY AND NYONYA BELINDA QUAH

Roy's interest in the Peranakan culture stemmed largely from his father's Penang Peranakan upbringing. He steeped himself in the culture and, through his links with the Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor, planned a Peranakan wedding in Klang, Selangor for his childhood sweetheart.

Roy and Belinda (Pinto), who is of Portuguese descent, decided on the Penang Peranakan Mansion as the location for their period Peranakan wedding photography.

They posed in three sets of costumes: Belinda in the *sarong kebaya*, *baju panjang* and finally the traditional *koon*, matching Roy's *baju china*, a western vest with a star *kerosang* on the lapel, and the *tng sah beh kua* respectively.

A week before their church wedding ceremony, the Quahs held the *sohjah tiga hari* and tea ceremony to pay respects to both the groom's and bride's family members.

On a fine July Sunday morning, Roy left his home in his traditional *tng sah beh kua* and picked up his richly attired bride in the *koon* to return to his family home.

A hundred metres from Roy's house, Belinda *lenggang* (sashayed) the rest of the way, led by a wedding procession with *teng*, *chye kee*, *keong teng* and umbrellas, and to the high-pitched joyous call of the *seronee*. The procession woke up the whole neighbourhood to a rare sight and sound show!

The *sohjah tiga hari* ended with the tea ceremony offered to family members on both sides of the bridal couple. Belinda's family, the Pintos, sportingly took part in these ceremonies and came prepared with *ang pous*. This was not unexpected as the Pintos have Chinese and Indian in-laws.

A stunning picture of the married couple in full Peranakan wedding regalia, posing in the bridal chamber of the Penang Peranakan Mansion.

After the ceremony, Belinda quickly re-appeared in her *sarong kebaya* resplendent in Roy's collection of Peranakan jewellery that he had gifted her and mingled with her lunch guests.



The joyous and traditional wedding procession on the way to Roy's family home in Klang.



Nyonya Belinda wearing her rings from Baba Roy's gift to her of antique Peranakan jewellery built up over many years of painstaking acquisition.





*A portrait of a magnificent fusion of Scottish and Peranakan cultures and colours in the Chee family home on Heeren Street, Malacca. Nyonya Kelly dons a richly embroidered traditional koon with husband Scott in Scottish kilt and the rest of the Percival clan posing in front of the family hall.*

### **BABA SCOTT AND NYONYA KELLY PERCIVAL**

Scott met Kelly when they were pursuing their Master's degrees in the University of Cambridge. He proposed to her in New York on Bow Bridge in Central Park on a wintry November day after five years together.

An intimate civil wedding followed in London, with the bigger wedding ceremony in Malacca, the town where Kelly grew up.

Kelly is a descendant of the renowned Chee Yam Chuan whose family still resides in the pre-war house next to the Chee Yam Chuan Temple on Heeren Street, Malacca. As the second daughter to Peranakan philanthropists Mr and Mrs Charlie Chee, returning home to be ceremonially married was an obvious requirement.

It has been more than two generations since the last bride or groom wore a traditional Peranakan wedding outfit in the Chee's ancestral home. So Kelly's wedding was the perfect occasion for all the Chee family's embroidery and trimmings to be displayed once more to lend a traditional

festive ambience to the house. Various sets of embroidered *bee langsir* (lintel curtains) adorned the doors and a pair of wedding *keong tengs* (wedding lanterns) decked the ancestral hall where most of the main events were held.

The *lap chai* or exchange of gifts ceremony kicked off four days of festivities in the Chee family home.

The groom's entourage arrived at the Chee's residence in four Malaccan trishaws bearing four trays of gifts. The Percivals, of Scottish descent, were warmly received by the host who was presented with the gifts. These trays of gifts were neatly arranged around a roasted pig in front of the Chee ancestral altar followed by Kelly's father offering incense to inform his ancestors of his daughter's impending marriage.

After a short tea reception, the Percivals took their leave and were presented with four trays of gifts that were partially returned and exchanged with new presents. Hence the matrimonial relationship took off with the spirit of give-and-





take in a happy setting.

The wedding ceremony took place two days later on a Saturday morning with the arrival of the groom, his family and friends.

Following Peranakan tradition, Scott's parents lit the phoenix candles followed by Kelly's parents setting alight the dragon candles in the front hall.

The exchange of vows took place in the *chim cheh* (air well) where chairs were neatly arranged facing the ancestral hall. This was followed by a quick succession of paying respects to their elders in the *sohjah tiga hari* ceremony and the boisterous and fun-filled tea ceremony.

The bride soon made a quick change into



her *sarong kebaya* and the couple made their way to the Chee Temple next door to offer incense to the other ancestors enshrined there.

For the evening reception, Kelly opted for the traditional Peranakan bridal *koon* while Scott showcased his heritage by donning his highland official suit, the tartan kilt and sporran.

The locals wore their traditional *sarong kebaya*s and *baju china* while the Scottish male guests looked

dashing in their kilts. Guests were treated to traditional Peranakan dance performances and the evening ended on a high note as they literally danced the night away. ❄

(Above) The wedding was solemnised in the first *chim cheh* (air well) of the Chee ancestral home on Heeren Street now known as Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock.

(Left) This ceremony is performed in hopes for a first-born son. It is also known as *golek ranjang* (rolling on the bed). In the days of our forefathers it was done as part of the *ann chng* (decorating the bridal bed). Nowadays it is performed on the wedding day itself. Baba Cedric is seen giving instructions to the boy.



# REFRESHING A LIVING HERITAGE

Baba Colin Chee speaks to Nyonya Melissa Chan, the new curator of Malacca's pioneer Peranakan Museum – The Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum located at 50, Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock. After some 27 years, the museum is soon to undergo its first major makeover and Nyonya Melissa is in the thick of it. She shares some of her thoughts of where the museum is headed and its history.



Nyonya Melissa Chan, who now heads up the museum and is overseeing its changes.

## Who founded the museum and what was the motivation for the Chan family to do this?

The museum was founded in 1986 by my late uncle Chan Kim Lay, who was inspired to bring the awareness of the Peranakan culture to visitors in Malaysia. My father Chan Kim Cheng and his other brothers now manage the museum and I am its curator in training.

## What were the challenges of setting up like, and what are your perceived challenges for the future?

Because he was one of the museum's pioneers, getting awareness in the early days was one of the

challenges, says my cousin William Chan, Uncle Kim Lay's son. Immediate challenges for the future would be learning how to preserve the items within the museum, and making decisions on traffic flow management in order to ensure the house and its items are preserved for as long as possible.

## There is now at least one more boutique or private museum in Malacca. Is there duplication in the thematic displays? Have owners got round to discuss how they can complement each other in documenting Malacca's Peranakan culture to visitors?

There isn't a body or organisation for museum owners here that we know of, but if there is one, it would definitely be something which we would be keen on being involved in. We would like to extend our contribution to the up keep of heritage in Malacca. Each museum currently has its own unique offering for visitors to the town which don't come into conflict with one another, but it would be great to have more sharing and communication of ideas, and conservation methodologies which could lead to future collaboration.

## As a first mover in this area, how are you planning to re-energise your exhibits further?

Right now, we are documenting and talking to the residents who lived in the house before and after the war. We are re-designing the tour to incorporate certain anecdotal stories of when the family stayed in the house and also include more specific dates to the tour. In the long term, tours specific to the architecture of the house, or catering to children's education are being mapped out. Incorporating new technology like QR codes into the exhibits for walk-in visitors will also be something we are considering.

## What are your family museum's strengths that you can play to?

The house is still used as a *rumah abu* by the family, which makes it a living museum. Almost all the artifacts and interior are left as the family lived in it. This creates an experience for visitors who would like to visit a house museum. We do hope to create a welcoming and familiar atmosphere as visitors



This staircase is arguably the most exquisitely carved ever to be found among Malacca's traditional houses.





The beautifully intricate screen that separates the *tiang gelap* (dark hall) from the formal reception hall.

walk through the rooms of the house, to truly bring the spirit of Peranakan hospitality to life.

### What are visitors' favourite exhibits in the museum that get the most ohs and ahs and wows?

Lead Tour Guide Christina says that the best parts of the museum visitors find fascinating are in the details of the house. For instance favourite features are the screen dividing the *tiang gelap* (dark hall) from the formal reception hall. Here ladies of the house could peer through the screen to get a glimpse of visitors in the reception hall, especially if they were handsome young babas! The other features that also interest visitors are the security measures that were put in place like the covering of the staircase between the downstairs and upstairs of the house, and the peep-hole to look into the street from the master bedroom floor. All these are telling features of a Peranakan home at the turn of the century.

### What are the family's favourite exhibits that it thinks are unique to the museum?

The kitchen is definitely a place which we would like to bring to life more in our future tours, as it is the heart of the home where the family truly spent many days and much time growing up in. For instance, there is a unique piece in the kitchen – a *putu mayam* maker modified into a bench. This was done specially by my grandfather for my grandmother to make it easier for her to make her *putu mayam*. There are stories in the kitchen that have yet to be told!

### How many visitors do you get on average in a year and what's their profile?

Recently the museum has been getting many visitors from Singapore thanks to the *Little Nyonya* show, which brought an influx of people asking us if the house was featured in the show! We are thankful to have many schools from Singapore come over to visit us to learn about their heritage. Because of the *Little Nyonya*, we have also been blessed with an influx of visitors from China, including dignitaries like Hu Jintao, the former President of China, who visited us in 2009, and more recently Jia Qing Ling, China's Chairman of Political Administration. ❄



Nyonya Melissa's grandmother's personal *putu mayam* (string hopper) maker.



# INFUSING PASSION

Baba Stephen Koh adapts his mother's recipes to create fusion Peranakan dishes

Growing up in a Peranakan family, I started picking up Peranakan cooking when my mum was alive, which is almost 20 years ago. I would help her in the kitchen as she could not stand for too long whenever she cooked due to her rheumatism.

I took the opportunity to jot the recipes diligently into my notebook as she explained the ingredients and how to cook them.

On hindsight, it was a wise decision to do the extra work of documenting her recipes. I am still holding on to that notebook like a treasure! Now that she is no longer with me, I can still continue to cook her dishes the way she liked them. *Mak's* (mother's) home cooked food is always *sedap!* (delicious!)

*Food Styling and photography by Anton Kilayko.*

Cooking has been my passion so when I left the corporate world in 2012, I decided to pick up my utensils again. Many friends have been encouraging and given me valuable feedback when I started cooking Peranakan dishes and entertaining in my home.

To date, I have even been engaged to cook at other people's homes for their own parties. As a private chef, I feel truly honoured and happy to share our Peranakan cuisine and culture with people who appreciate good food.

Although keeping the tradition alive is key, I have also experimented to "marry" Western and Asian ingredients into traditional Peranakan cooking as a refreshing change. Here I share some fusion-style recipes that I have created and which have proven to be popular with my guests.



*Bakwan Kepiting.*

## BAKWAN KEPITING (CRAB MEATBALLS)

*Ingredients (serves 4)*

400g pork bones  
100g minced pork  
100g shredded bamboo shoots  
60g steamed crabmeat  
1 egg  
30g round dumpling skin  
1 tbsp sesame oil  
1½ teaspoon light soya sauce  
½ teaspoon white pepper  
Coriander leaves for garnish

*Method*

Bring to boil the pork bones in some water and throw away the water. Then add the cleansed pork bones to 1 litre of water to make the soup stock.

Add the bamboo shoots and bring to boil. Add salt to taste. When ready to serve, add the cooked dumplings to the boiling soup and serve in individual bowls. Top with coriander leaves.

*To make the dumplings:*

Mix well the minced meat, sesame oil, soya sauce, pepper and egg. Use a tablespoon to scoop the meat mixture onto the dumpling skin. Add in the crabmeat and fold the skin to form a semi circle. Use cornstarch and water to seal the edge. Boil water in a pot to cook the dumplings. The dumplings are done when they float. Scoop out at once.



## ANGEL HAIR DRY MEE SIAM WITH UDANG GORENG ASAM (ASAM PRAWN)

*Ingredients* (serves 4)

400g angel hair pasta  
30g shallots chopped  
30g garlic pounded  
50g dried prawns, soaked, drained and pounded  
50g dried prawns (whole), soaked and drained  
2 tbsp chilli powder and 2 red chillies, finely ground  
4tbsp cooking oil  
80ml *asam* water  
600ml chicken stock  
1 tbsp fermented soya bean (*tau cheo*)  
300g bean sprouts  
1 square bean curd (*tau kwa*), cubed and fried (for garnish, optional)  
Salt and sugar to taste

### *Method*

Cook the angel hair pasta *al dente* as per instruction on the packaging. Drain and set aside. Heat oil to stir fry garlic and dried prawns (whole) until fragrant. Dish out and set aside.

Using the same oil, stir fry shallots until slightly brown. Add pounded dried prawns and stir fry for a few minutes. Add fermented soya bean and chilli and stir fry until fragrant. Next add the chicken stock and *asam* water.

Add the bean sprouts then the pasta and gently mix them well. Finally add in the fried garlic and dried prawns that were set aside earlier. Add salt to taste, if necessary.

To serve, twirl the pasta on a plate and garnish with the cubed bean curd (optional). Top off with one *udang goreng asam*.

### *Udang Goreng Asam*

*Ingredients* (serves 4-6)

0.5 kg big prawns  
3 tbsp *asam* paste  
Salt  
Pepper  
1 tbsp sugar

### *Method*

Clean the prawns and remove all whiskers. Slice the back of prawns and remove the black veins, leaving the shell, heads and tails intact. You can also remove the shell only for the convenience of your guests.

Next, mix the *asam* paste with water and squeeze out the *asam* juice and remove the seeds. Add a bit of salt and pepper and 1 tbsp of sugar to the *asam* water and mix well. Pour the *asam* mixture on the prawns and marinate for 30 - 45 minutes.

When ready fry the prawns in a bit of hot oil. Stir the prawns gently and allow the sauce to slowly thicken and until prawns are cooked. Place the prawns on the angel hair *mee siam* when you are ready to serve.

This dish is also commonly served as one of the side dishes for *nasi lemak*.

Angel Hair Mee Siam with Asam Prawn.







*Pisang Pengan.*

### **PISANG PENGAT (BANANA SAUCE) WITH VANILLA ICE CREAM**

*Ingredients (serves 4 - 6)*

1 comb of bananas

2½ cups water

200g gula melaka (palm sugar)

1 pandan leaf

Salt to taste

200ml coconut milk

Vanilla ice cream

Roasted peanuts (pounded roughly)

#### *Method*

Crumble the palm sugar into a pot and add water. Slowly bring to boil. Once the sugar is dissolved and water is boiling, add in the pandan leaf. Slowly pour in the coconut milk and keep stirring so that the coconut milk does not curdle. Ensure fire is on low heat.

Slice the banana in half and add into the mixture. Add a pinch a salt. Once the banana softens, turn off the fire and let the *pengan* cool. Serve the *pisang pengat* with a scoop of ice cream. Top the ice cream with the grated peanuts. ✱

*Nyonyas' love for  
intan and berlian*

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# THE HAPPY LEAN YEARS

Baba Colin Chee relives his childhood experiences through this very readable narrative by Nyonya Josephine Chia

For whatever reason, some of the best authors to emerge from the Singapore's English-speaking mainstream are, arguably, Peranakans. I would rate Nyonya Josephine Chia as one of them, even though she has been living in the United Kingdom for several years now.

She doesn't jump at you. She just comes through in a very quiet sort of way in her latest published book *Kampung Spirit*, like a stealthy cat creeping up with silent patient strides on an unsuspecting prey. And it is interesting that the very first incarnation of her story, *Balik Kampung*, was published in this magazine some years back!

*Kampung Spirit* is a collection of short stories about growing up in the 50s and 60s. While they are stories centred on the author's family living the *kampung* life in Potong Pasir, they will resonate with Singapore's boom generation which grew up when our country transitioned from British colony to self-government to a fully independence nation.

For history buffs, it will be Singapore's early modern history told and captured in a series of heart-warming, heart-breaking and sometimes heart-stopping short stories about what it was like growing up during those tough, hungry, uncertain yet happy days.

But one thing is true. As Josephine writes in her book's *Foreword*:

"Modern Singapore has all the trappings of material success...And yet there is a growing sense that this never-ending race to acquire all the material comforts isn't giving us true happiness....When the *kampung* spirit is in evidence...this warm feeling of being cared for makes life meaningful and brings happiness."

Our *kampongs* may be long gone. We may even have to travel to the outskirts of Malacca to find glimpses of this fast disappearing way of community living. But I sense that this spirit still kindles among Singaporeans, waiting to be lit.

It is a book I would recommend to all teachers and students in Singapore schools, if for nothing else, than as an enjoyable good read on a rainy grey day to derive a sense of our being as Singaporeans - a book not to be taught, but to be enjoyed for its simple story telling.

Let me share a few stories from the book. They don't need explanations for those born in those times. The book speaks for itself. It doesn't need help from a book reviewer. "Maybe my parents were thinking of giving me away too.

My heart skipped several beats at this possibility....I had understood from my brothers that one child had been given away just after the Japanese war. ..when Pa did not have a job....This was not unusual in rural areas....It was the test of a mother's strength

to give a child away

so that he would have a better life than to keep him with her to suffer their poverty."

"To wipe their (author's rich cousins) bottoms, they had a roll of loo-paper, white soft and clean, compared to the squares of newspaper we had to use. When caught in the rain whilst queuing to use our outhouses, our newspaper squares would get

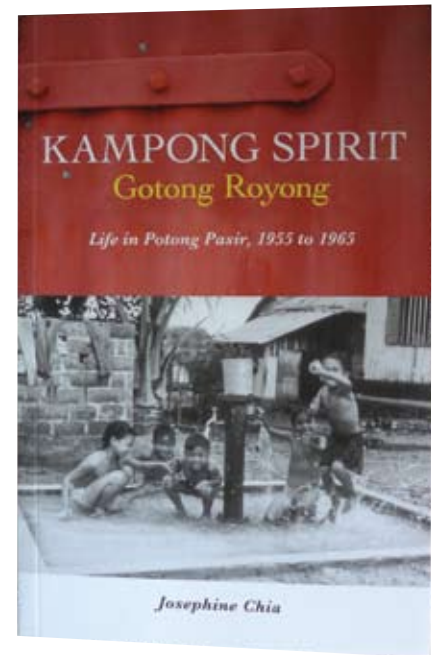
soggy and when we wiped our bottoms, the newsprint would come off and smear our bottoms with black ink!"

"In our *kampung*, we lived and worked together as one large friendly community, but at the same time we celebrated our ethnic diversity. Malay, Chinese, Peranakans, Indians and Eurasians lived next door to each other without rancour, our doors

open to each other. The common language was (pasar) Malay, so that everyone could communicate with each other."

"The day after the parties (of English expat neighbours) lots of uneaten food was thrown out...Some food was unsalvageable, but foods like cakes could survive if left in tins or wrapped well in baking paper...Now that I was nine, I was already an expert, making sure not to plunge my arm into the bins but to slowly pick each item layer by layer..."

Josephine shares these fascinating vignettes of life in a *kampung* that the large majority of our present young can't even imagine possible. It's a new world that we live in; one that perhaps all too often we have begun to take for granted. ❄



Book Cover of *Kampung Spirit*

**"In our *kampung*, we lived and worked together as one large friendly community, but at the same time we celebrated our ethnic diversity. Malay, Chinese, Peranakans, Indians and Eurasians lived next door to each other without rancour, our doors open to each other. The common language was (pasar) Malay."**

*Kampung Spirit, Gotong Royong – Life in Potong Pasir, 1955-1965*

By Josephine Chia

Published by Marshall Cavendish

Available from all reputable bookstores



# CROSSING OVER TO KOREA

Koreans were introduced to Singapore's Peranakan culture recently at a travelling exhibition at their National Museum of Korea



The Asian Civilisations Museum's Peranakan exhibition called "*The Peranakan World: Cross-cultural Art from Singapore and the Straits*" was successfully launched on 19 March 2013 and ended on 19 May.

It was to give Koreans a glimpse of Singapore's multi-racial communities, how they evolved and how they form the core of Singapore's identity.

With 230 objects from the Peranakan

Museum, supplemented by loans from local collectors, the exhibition tells the fascinating story of how Chinese immigrants created an unique culture when they settled in their new homes in the Straits Settlements.

Visitors were able to explore this fusion culture that flourished during the golden age of the Peranakans from the late 19th to early 20th centuries.

The exhibition in Korea marks a significant milestone for Singapore as it is the first time that its Peranakan collection has travelled to East Asia. The exhibition had previously travelled once to Paris in 2010 where it was shown at the Museum du Quai Branly.

Dr Alan Chong, Director of the Asian Civilisations Museum and Peranakan Museum said, "We are proud to present Peranakan art and culture to audiences in Korea. Peranakan art is an important example of multi-cultural contact, which reveals Singapore as a multicultural state, formed by centuries of trade, immigration and colonial networks."

The exhibition included a weekend programme allowing visitors to gain an appreciation of the colourful and fusion culture of the Peranakans through engaging workshops on Peranakan beading, cuisine and fashion.

It was jointly curated by Dr Pedro Moura Carvalho, Chief Curator, Asian Civilisations

(Above)  
An exhibit of a wealthy Peranakan's bridal bed, ceramics and carpets typically found in their bridal chambers.

(Right) An assortment of baju panjangs and sarong kebayas worn by Peranakan nyonyas as everyday wear or on special occasions accompanied by brilliant jewellery.





Museum and Peranakan Museum; Jackie Yoong, Curator, Peranakan Museum; and Dr Park Sunghye, Curator, National Museum of Korea.

This altar cloth (*tok wi*) on the right was on display at the National Museum of Korea as part of the travelling exhibition. It is decorated with a large dragon woven in purple and silver metallic thread on the lower panel, and a pair of dragons on the upper panel. Dragons are symbols of the emperor and thus also are associated with males. This cloth is one of a pair; both are part of a set of textiles commissioned as a gift for a wedding. Two pairs of chair covers and four cushion covers complete the set. During the *Cheo Thau* coming-of-age ceremony, paired altar cloths were used on a *sam kai* altar, which was dedicated to the Jade emperor *Ti Kong*.

The group of textiles is part of a donation from the family of Tan Tjien Sien of Manado, one of the oldest Peranakan families in eastern Indonesia. They trace their ancestry to 1790. Along with two chair covers, the altar cloth is now on display in the special exhibition *Devotion and Desire: Cross-Cultural Art in Asia*, at the Asian Civilisations Museum through 8 December 2013. ✱



(Above) *Tok Wi* from China, early 20th century. Cotton, metallic thread, 102.4 x 115.6 cm



## PIECES OF PERANAKAN HERITAGE

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# SITTING WELL

Baba Emeric Lau reports on Main Wayang's latest production, *The Chair* – A Peranakan Tapestry

Did you ever attempt one of those compositions that required you to write about the life of an inanimate object, like a coin or a toy? Watching this play unfold, I was reminded of my attempts at such stories. *The Chair* is perhaps an epic equivalent, tracing the title object's journey within one family across more than a century.

Written by award-winning playwright Baba Desmond Sim and featuring a soundscape by Ernest Thio, *The Chair* was staged by the Main Wayang Company at the Tampines Primary School Black Box Theatre on 30 and 31 March. This production was commissioned by the Tampines Community Arts & Culture Club, together with the People's Association's Arts & Culture Outreach Programme.

Artistic Director Richard Tan explained that the piece is layered. "On one level, *The Chair* is about heritage and value. It is about the intrinsic worth of objects that have been used with much love and care. We hope it reminds people to treasure family heirlooms, whatever form these may take. At another level, the play traces the journey of migrants. There's the journey to a new place for survival, the yearning to return to the motherland, and the realisation that their adopted land has become a place to call home. The action is really about the trials and tribulations, the search for identity and culture, and the fear of losing one's connections to the motherland. These are the powerful strands that bind all immigrant epics."

It is hoped that the piece will give us a better appreciation of our forefathers and the hardscrabble lives they led so that our lives here today are more secure.

At the most literal level, the narrative follows the life and times of one Peranakan family - in scenes enacted around an old family heirloom, a grand mother-of-pearl chair.



The stage set incorporated the use of visual projections, and while these were intended to complement the action, they had the opposite effect at some moments. A rather tacky image of the chair sinking into a sea of flames was played, which I felt detracted from the potency of the female protagonist's monologue as she recalled how she torched her family

heirloom. The ensemble cast must be credited for their effort in taking on multiple roles as the story progressed down the generations. Jackie Pereira was particularly convincing in her transition from young nyonya to powerful matriarch, while Frederick Soh brought on the laughs early as a hapless coolie trying to make a living. I'm also glad that the piece touched on issues of great relevance today, such as the need to look past racial or religious differences when assessing someone's true nature.

Hopefully, this piece will spur Singaporeans to gain a better appreciation of their own origins and embark on journeys to know their cultures better. The play also gives them a bit more insight into the lives of the Peranakans. ❖

*Dramatic moments in the family saga that is spread over five generations. A special performance is scheduled in Malacca in July, followed by touring performances in Singapore's heartlands, including Katong and East Coast, through to next year.*





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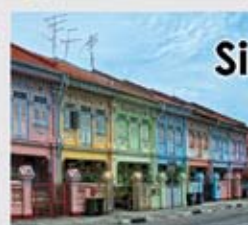
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# SIMPAN BARANG BARANG (COLLECTING)

Lawyer Burok takes a dig at collectors in the know, or who don't know

People love to collect just about any thing old. New collectors must be aware of two important aspects: Whether the items are real, genuine, fakes or reproductions, and whether these were sourced by the seller through less than legal means.

If the seller represented to you that the item was an antique, and you relied on his representation and paid the price of an antique, then later discovered that the item was a reproduction, you really *kena main* (conned)! This provides for a case of misrepresentation against the seller.

The misrepresentation is that the seller had informed you in no uncertain terms that you were buying an antique and paid the market price. If the seller invariably denies making a misrepresentation to you on the nature of the item you bought, the matter would have to go to court to determine *siapa chakap betol siapa chakap bohong!* (who spoke the truth and who lied!)

There was a case of a Chinese man who went to a shop in Katong and was attracted to a pair of earrings. The owner said they were *anting anting* (earrings) but the man thought, from the sound of it, that the owner said

antique, antique. So he bought them. Later he found out that the earrings were not antique and he wanted to sue the owner, on the basis that the owner told him the earrings were *anting!*

What happens when you *beli barang* (buy things) which were obtained by the seller through less than legal means? Then *nyonyas* and *babas*, you have to prove that you were a bona fide purchaser in good faith.

*Apa itu* "bona fide" you may ask. It certainly is not Nona Friday. In Latin it means you must be a buyer in good faith, one who paid and had no knowledge that it was probably a *churi* (stolen) item.

If you, as the buyer, are aware that it is a *churi* item and have paid for it, then the transaction between you and the seller can be declared null and void. The item can then be returned to the real owner of the *churi* item. In that situation you not only *kena main* (get played out) but may also *kena fine* or *masuk penjara!* (go to jail!)

Lawyer Burok disclaims all responsibility on the content of the law in this article and request that you verify the law with a Lawyer Betol (real lawyer). ❄

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# TALKING CULTURE

Baba Emeric Lau reports on *All Things Peranakan*, a two-day event organised by The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS)

As part of our aim to engage both members and the wider public, TPAS assembled a panel featuring experts on various aspects of the culture to deliver a series of talks over two days (19-20 April) at the Asian Civilisations Museum.

The roster of speakers included such luminaries as Dr Kenson Kwok, Dr Alan Chong, Babas Chan Eng Thai, Desmond Sim, Randall Ee and Nyonya Bebe Seet.

Participants were treated to insights on Baba lifestyles as the speakers analyzed material objects, architecture, cuisine, decoration, dressing, practices and language.

Especially engaging were oft-overlooked areas of study, such as Randall's segment on the layout of a garden in a Peranakan home, the various plants and trees to be found within, and their significance in terms of both uses and source.

There was ample opportunity for interaction, with moderated Q&A sessions where the audience could engage the speakers on their topics of discussion.

This was as it was intended by the organisers – a deliberately unscholarly but informal yet familiar exposition of the community's culture and hence the title of the event – *In Conversation. All Things Peranakan*.

Concerns over the continuity of Peranakan culture frequently digressed into the sharing of personal recollections.

Acknowledging that the times have changed, Dr Alan Chong noted that Peranakans have always had to be

chameleons after a fashion, switching between multiple identities according to circumstance. Indeed, it is this quality that has enriched the culture, which harmoniously incorporates elements and values from many diverse sources across the globe.

Leisurely breaks for tea and lunches saw buffet lines forming in the Ngee Ann Auditorium lobby of the Asian Civilisations Museum at Empress Place. Nobody needed an invitation to tuck into the hearty Peranakan spread, and the food was devoured amid raucous chatter.

The event concluded with a buffet dinner on 20 April following the presentation of Certificates of Appreciation to our speakers. Guests danced the night away to the strains of tambourines and guitars accompanied by The Peranakan Voices.

Stay tuned. With the largely positive response, more events are in the pipeline! ❄



# MALAM NOSTALGIA

Nyonya Shia Ai Lee reports on a memorable performance

A Peranakan 'Nite of Nostalgia' was held at the Serangoon Country Club in March for their members. The Peranakan Voices were part of the highlights for entertainment, including a skit by our veteran actor Baba GT Lye.

The evening started off with lots of anticipation from both the performers and dinner guests. Some came without any idea of what was going to happen, while others expected a lot of laughter from Baba GT Lye. For those who knew us, The Peranakan Voices, they waited anxiously for our singing segment.

After a tongue-in-cheek introduction by our emcee Baba Chan Eng Thai, we got off to a resounding start. He reminded us of the way we used to live especially in the Katong area and the food that was available then. We sang five songs, all evergreen favorites amongst die-hard Peranakan fans.



Our own choir member and actress, Nyonya Shirley Tan teamed up with Baba GT to put up a skit that showcased the manner in which feudal families favor their sons over their daughters. It actually brought a tear to my eye when I first saw the rehearsal, which struck a chord in Hokkien dialect. And Nyonya Shirley's own lyrics to the tune of the Cantonese evergreen *Shanghai Beach* was moving enough to shake the earth. ❄



## PERANAKAN ASSOCIATIONS IN THE REGION

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#### Association of Chetti Melaka (Peranakan Indians) Singapore

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### PENANG

#### State Chinese (Penang) Association

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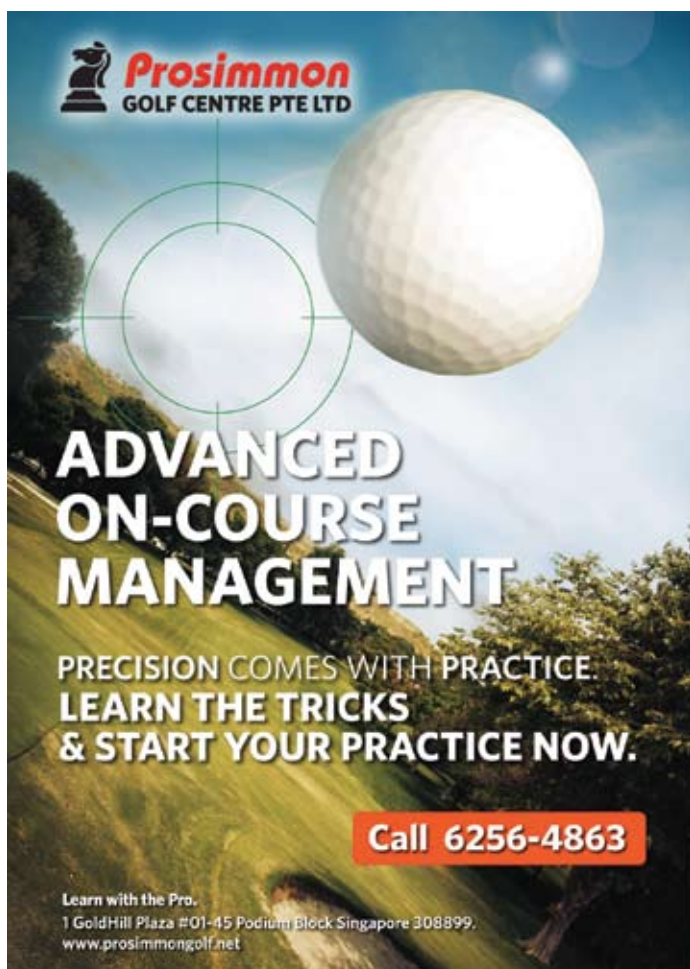
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We appeal to all members who have not submitted two hard copy passport photos of themselves to please do so in order for the committee to produce your membership cards.

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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## 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. 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](http://www.peranakanmuseum.sg) Email: [nhb\\_pm\\_vs@nhb.gov.sg](mailto:nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg) Tel: 6332 7591.



**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.

**Devotion and Desire.** Cross Cultural Art in Asia. New acquisitions of the ACM. An exhibition through to 8 Dec 2013. Includes Peranakan artifacts on display.



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](http://wanqingyuan.org.sg).



### LANDMARKS

**Blair Plain.** A typical Peranakan residential area around Sportiswoode Park, Blair Road and Neil Road which is worth a stroll. Visit Guan Antiques nearby at Kampong Bahru Road, a treasure trove of Peranakan heirlooms. [http://www.arch.nus.edu.sg/soa/design\\_studio/dds2b/blair/study/Blair.html](http://www.arch.nus.edu.sg/soa/design_studio/dds2b/blair/study/Blair.html).

**Emerald Hill Road.** Another interesting residential district showcasing the best of eclectic Peranakan 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.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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