

the **Peranakan** ISSUE  
1 <sup>20</sup>/<sub>14</sub>



**WE'RE 20!**  
MILESTONES  
FROM THE LAST  
20 YEARS

**EQUINE**

**PERANAKANS AND THEIR KUDA CONNECTIONS**

**EXCESSES**





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THE  
PERANAKAN  
ASSOCIATION  
SINGAPORE

[www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg)

ON THE COVER • A Nyonya in sarong kebaya and her champion horse and jockey at the Penang Turf Club, 1950s.  
Collection of Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee

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The image features three identical gold diamond brooches arranged vertically on a dark background. Each brooch has a complex, symmetrical floral or star-like design with multiple facets and is encrusted with numerous small, clear diamonds. A thin gold chain is attached to the top and bottom of each brooch. To the right of the brooches, there is a piece of traditional embroidery on a dark fabric, featuring a vibrant red flower with green leaves and a black lace-like pattern.

## NYONYAS' LOVE FOR INTAN AND BERLIAN



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# 20 GLORIOUS YEARS!

How time races by! No sooner than we know it, the Year of the Horse has galloped in with the promise of an exciting 12 months ahead, and a new beginning for *The Peranakan*.

In this special 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue, the editorial team is pleased to present a fresh new look for our magazine and an emphasis on more visuals. We hope you like it. We also show you the people behind the magazine; the current and previous team of volunteers who have been producing every issue over the last 20 years out of love for the culture and pride in our heritage.

Our anniversary year is a time for celebration in more ways than one. We have thumbed through pages and pages from our 20-year pile to pick out events of significance for the Peranakans. We will be the first to admit that ours is not an exhaustive list; more could have been included if space permitted.

The cover shot of a nyonya with a horse depicts an era when

Peranakans were once active in Singapore's horse racing scene. Without the glamour and gloss of F1, the races were major events then, and horses were essential in all forms of transport. We also cover current developments in *Wayang Peranakan* and the museums that have not only acquired important collections but also ventured into contemporary art. Read too, about an unusual Indonesian Peranakan tradition of celebrating the eighth birthday.

Finally, our warmest congratulations to the Main Wayang Company which is celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It has been successful in bringing the Peranakan culture to the public, young and old.

Happy New Year to all.

**Linda Chee**  
Editor

## THANK YOU FROM OUR PRESIDENT

On this 20th Anniversary of *The Peranakan*, I would like to thank all our past and present editors and editorial teams, contributors and advertisers for making the magazine what it is today.

Everywhere I go, I receive without fail, compliments from members and other readers about how newsy, informative and well designed our magazine is. They are also very appreciative that our community has a magazine that faithfully documents and reflects the cultural mosaic of our babas and nyonys.

A magazine like this is only as good as its volunteer editors and contributors. But it is also true that without its advertisers a magazine's sustainability will eventually be called into question. Our quarterly magazine, which is distributed free, is truly grateful for the support its advertisers have given all these past years.

Many of you may not be aware, but our advertising revenues help to subsidise only a part of the magazine's total printing and distribution costs. The Association continues to underwrite much of these costs. We therefore appeal to you, both members and readers, to help us sustain the quarterly by contributing to a fund for the magazine.

If you feel it in your heart to do so, please write a cheque out for any amount made payable to 'The Peranakan Association Singapore' and post it c/o Katong Antique House, 208 East Coast Road, Singapore 428907.

We thank you once again for your support. Enjoy reading and *kamsiah!*

**Peter Wee, President**  
*The Peranakan Association Singapore*

## CALLING FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The next issue of *The Peranakan* will focus on the theme of Ancestry. Do you have a story to tell about your family tree or how you have begun or even completed recording your genealogy? Have there been any reunions through sheer effort or coincidence? Whatever your story, we would like to hear from you. Please write to the Editor at [lindacheesg@gmail.com](mailto:lindacheesg@gmail.com).

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

I have always read the articles in your magazine with keen interest. Now I must thank you for another benefit, recently derived. Through one of your articles in which my great, great, great grandfather, Baba Lim Leack, was mentioned, and with the help of your introduction, I am now in contact with my third cousins.

Unknown to each party, we had been separately building up our family trees. With the newfound synergy, we were able to establish many more links that had eluded us when we were working independently.

Let me encourage readers to use the magazine for establishing contacts with otherwise unknown relatives. You will be surprised, as I did, by the resulting social interaction among long lost cousins and the amount of "hidden" information that can surface.

**Chia Hock Jin, Singapore**

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# 20/20

As *The Peranakan* celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we over this period. Nyonya Linda Chee, Babas Colin Chee issues to select the highlights of the last two decades



**1994 Mas Sepuloh** A compendium of Baba conversational expressions called *Mas Sepuloh* was published. Written by respected Peranakan expert Baba William Gwee, it remains a literary classic with long-forgotten gems such as *masok angin kuluair asap* (to come to naught) and *kus semangat* (an expression of surprise akin to 'goodness me!')

#### First Christies' auction

The value Peranakan heritage was internationally recognised with Christie's conducting its first auction of Straits Chinese ceramics, gold and silver.

#### 1995 Si Adek Beradek

Peranakan humour took to the stage with the Felix Chia play in Baba Malay, *Si Adek Beradek*, held at the World Trade Centre (WTC) auditorium. Directed by Johnson Choo, it was performed by actors including Nyonyas Mabel Lee, Rosalind Yapp, and Babas Tony Quek and Winston Tan.

#### 1996 New TPAS President

Baba Lee Kip Lee, a founder member of the newsletter, was elected president of The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS), replacing Baba George Tay, the incumbent since 1992. The association went on to woo young Peranakans, setting up a youth group and its own website, in June 1998.



Baba T W Ong.

#### 1999 Farewell George Tay and T W Ong

Two stalwarts of the Association passed on: Baba George Tay, the immediate past president, and Baba T W Ong, who was made honorary life president after 44 years of service. Baba Ong had been President from 1948, when TPAS was known as the *Straits Chinese British Association*, to 1992.

#### Archive photographs

The Association took the community call again and raised \$17,000 for the National Archives to purchase a collection of about 200 photographs on Peranakan subjects.

#### 1998 Food and craft charity fair

In November, the Association organised *Rasa Peranakan*, its first-ever food and craft charity fair at Great World City, raising \$68,000 for the Apex Harmony Lodge in support of dementia sufferers.

#### Rumah Baba book

In that same month, the Association sponsored the publication of the then-Singapore History Museum's coffee table book, *Rumah Baba – Life in a Peranakan House*, to record our unique culture.





# Vision

take a walk down memory lane to review milestones and Emeric Lau scour through the thick pile of past

**2000** Myriad milestones were crossed in the 100<sup>th</sup> year of TPAS.  
**New identity** A vibrant



new logo depicting a soaring phoenix was launched to express the exuberance, optimism and unique cultural heritage of the Peranakans. It replaced the old logo of four linked arms with the motto, *United Forever*, which shared the sentiment of Singapore's early independence.

**New cultural groups** TPAS' Cultural Development sub-committee under Baba Richard Tan created a record series of cultural groups for the

centennial celebration. These included the Peranakan Voices; a Young Models and Dance Troupe comprising performers from as young as four years old; the first ever Baba Capella & the Baba Shop Quartet; and the theatre group Anak Wayang.

**Chueh It Chap Goh** In October, tickets were snapped up weeks before the Gunong Sayang Association (GSA) staged *Chueh It Chap Goh* (the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> day of the Lunar month, when prayers and offerings were made to the gods) under the artistic direction of Baba GT Lye, who marked his debut as script writer. GSA's annual wayang at the WTC auditorium had become a high point for relatives and friends to dress up and meet once a year before watching traditional Peranakan moral values being



expressed in Baba Malay onstage with high humour and drama!

**The Peranakan Legacy** In December, the Asian Civilisations Museum at Armenian Street launched a permanent Peranakan gallery called the *Peranakan Legacy*, the precursor to the world's first Peranakan Museum eight years later.

**Baba Las Vegas** The centennial year closed with a grand gala dinner, themed *Baba Las Vegas*, graced by prominent Peranakans including the late Baba Dr Wee Kim Wee, Singapore's first Peranakan president, and the late Baba Lim Kim San, Singapore's former Finance Minister. Over 1,000 guests attended the event at the cavernous Neptune Theatre.

**2001** **Dah Sa Chupak Tak Boley Sa Gantang**

In March, the Association presented its first *Wayang Peranakan* called *Dah Sa Chupak Tak Boley Sa Gantang* (A quart will never make a gallon, i.e., you cannot change destiny). It was the first collaborative project between the Malacca



and Singapore Peranakan associations. Directed by Malaccan Kenny Chan, the hilarious hit play held at the WTC auditorium starred an all-Malacca cast including Kenny himself, the late stage doyen Chee Hood Siong, Cedric Tan and Fern Loo.



Baba Capella.



## 2002

### **Bibiks Behind Bars**

The Association's theatrical success was followed in September by the even



more successful *Bibiks Behind Bars* at the Kallang Theatre. The humorous musical comedy centering on the favourite afternoon pastime of *bibiks* and *nyonyas*, main *cherki*, was a big hit. Imagine a gang of *bibiks* being raided and ushered into black marias and using their wits and wiles to wriggle their way out. All performances were sold out!



## 2004 **Pinang Peranakan Museum**

The privately owned Pinang Peranakan Museum was opened after undergoing loving and extensive restoration. It is one of Penang's most beautiful and ornate private homes turned into

a cultural museum housing over 1,000 antiques and collectibles that you would find in homes of wealthy Peranakans in the late 19th and early 20th century. It was the home of *Kapitan* China Chung Keng Kwee, the wealthiest man in Penang at the time.

## 2005 **Dick gets Cultural Medallion**

Baba Dick Lee, the renowned composer and musical artiste, was awarded the Cultural Medallion for his contributions to the arts and culture.



Baba Dick Lee.

actively contributed articles and letters to the Association's newsletter. He also regularly attended the association's Dinner and Dances, and made donations.

**Peranakan Festival** A grand Peranakan Festival was held in November to mark the 105th Anniversary of TPAS. The festival bustled with events including a music and fashion show, comedy sketches, a craft and food fair at Millenia Walk, plus a grand staged Peranakan wedding procession. For the first time, our sister association from Phuket participated in the Baba convention held in Singapore.

**Peranakans at the Arts Festival.** The Main Wayang Company hosted a



Peranakans at the Arts Festival.

two-day series of Peranakan events, including a wedding procession, as a key component of the Singapore Arts Festival.

### **Farewell Dr Wee**

**Kim Wee** Quite a few tears were shed at the passing of Dr Wee Kim Wee who remains dear to our hearts as one of the Association's biggest supporters and the one who had mooted the idea of a publication to connect all Peranakans. The President of Singapore from 1985 to 1993, Dr Wee had



The Peranakan Festival.

Dr Wee Kim Wee.





## 2006 **Baba Malay Dictionary**

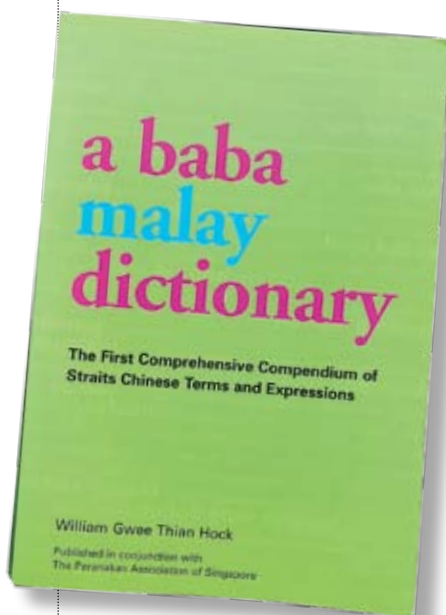
Singapore's very first compendium of Peranakan patois, *The Baba Malay Dictionary*, was published in a collaborative effort between the Association, publisher Berkeley Books and William Gwee. The bright green paperback was to prove useful in providing consistency and standards in what many had sidelined as a dying language.

### **Peranakans at Chingay**

Peranakans were represented at the annual Chingay Parade for the first time



Chingay 2006.



### **Myjoochiat.com**

Residents of Joo Chiat and Katong created a new community website called *myjoochiat.com* to revitalise the neighbourhood's Peranakan heritage. The district is renowned as the nerve centre of Peranakan life in Singapore resplendent with quaint Peranakan terraced houses and shops, and a great variety of Peranakan restaurants.

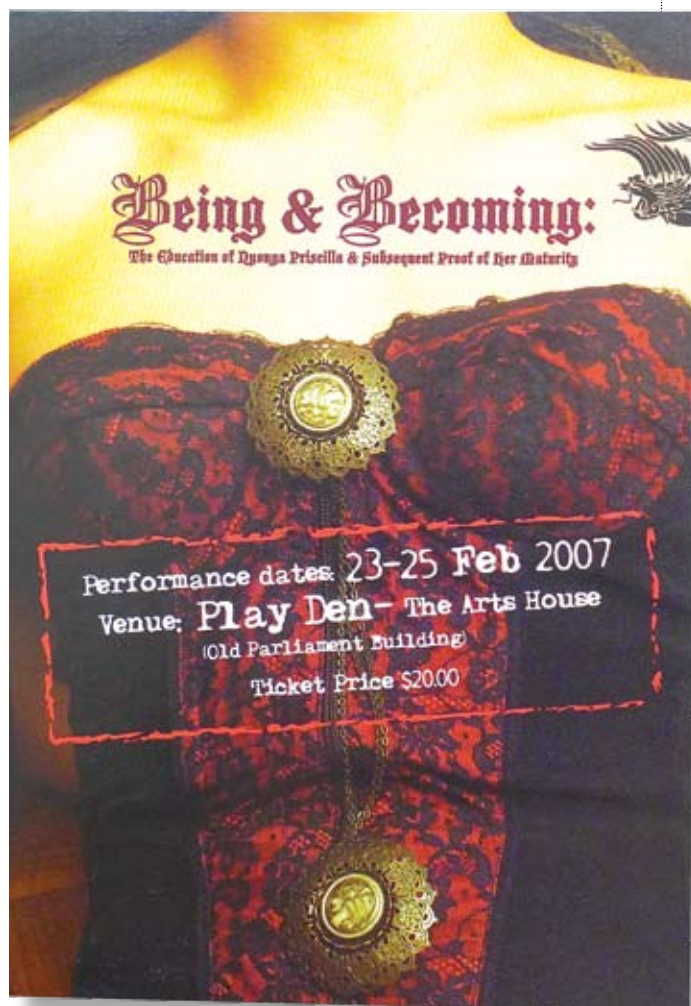
### **Farewell to**

**more stalwarts** We regretfully lost more stalwart supporters including Singapore's former Minister of Foreign Affairs S Rajaratnam and high court judge Lai Kew Chai. Sally Gan, a stalwart of Peranakan theatre, also passed on. She was best known for her colourful portrayal of a Cantonese black-and-white *amah* (helper) working for a Peranakan family and had acted in a record 17 GSA plays.



Nyonya Sally Gan.

**2007 *Being and Becoming*** The Association's youth group, PerANAKan, staged *Being and Becoming* at the Arts House. Directed by Emeric Lau, it explored issues of Peranakan identity from the point of view of today's youth, grappling with their cultural disconnection with the past.





## 2008 New Melbourne and Chetti chapters

Australia's first Peranakan association was formed in Melbourne with 33 founding members. Later in the year, the Chetti Melaka, or Peranakan Indians, also formed their own Association. They added to a loose federation of Peranakan associations in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia.

## World's only Peranakan Museum

In April, the world's first Peranakan Museum was opened at 39 Armenian Street by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, himself a Peranakan. It was set up at a cost of \$12 million and housed over 1,200 artefacts sourced from all over the world. To commemorate the

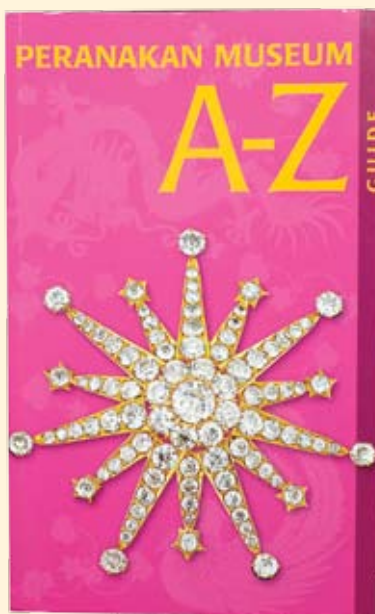
occasion, Singapore Post created a series of stamps called the Peranakan Museum Collection.

### NUS Baba House

In September another cultural landmark, the NUS Baba House, opened at 157 Neil Road. Costing \$4 million, it was opened by the then-President of Singapore, S R Nathan, one of the culture's strongest supporters. The nearly century-old



NUS Baba House



row house was acquired by NUS through a donation by Agnes Tan, daughter of the late Tun Tan Cheng Lock, a Straits Chinese community leader.

### House of Yeap Chor Ee

In Penang, the house of Yeap Chor Ee was opened in October, at 4 King's Street. The private museum was the former mansion of banking tycoon Baba Yeap who started out as a migrant eking a living as an itinerant barber to rise up and become the founder of Ban Hin Lee Bank in 1935.



House of Yeap Chor Ee, Georgetown, Penang.



## 2009 The Little Nyonya

The Little Nyonya television serial took Singapore by storm, and soon spread to the region and even China. Although not staged in Baba Malay, to the chagrin of purists, the use of Mandarin proved to be its winning stroke by gaining millions of Mandarin-speaking viewers. Interest in the Baba culture was stoked to a fever pitch especially among the younger generation. The serial was shot in many of the region's heritage homes and museums, chalking up a huge increase in visitors to these locations in Malacca, Penang and Singapore.

**Sayang Sayang** A popular English language sitcom called *Sayang Sayang* ran for 26 episodes in Singapore. Peppared with some Baba Malay, the





programme was about a Peranakan family that owned a *kueh chang* factory managed by the wife.

#### Peranakans at National Day

**Day** On 9 August, for the first time in 44 years of Singapore's independence, a Peranakan contingent participated in Singapore's National Day parade. Our community was represented by over 100 volunteers and performers from the Main Wayang Company, aged from 4 to 74 years.

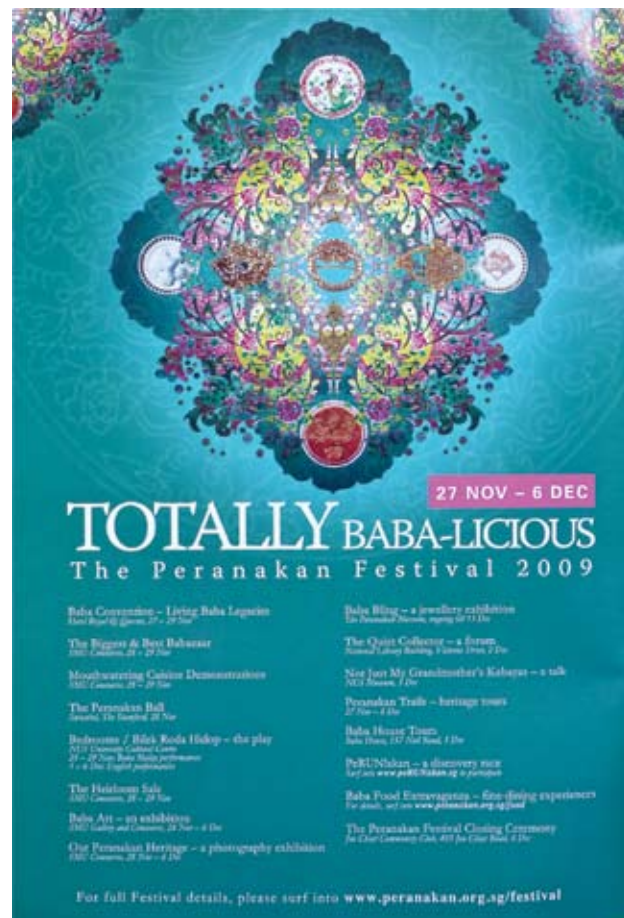
**Farewell William Tan** In May, Baba William Tan, one of the renowned Wayang Peranakan actors, passed on. He was famous for his female impersonations on stage and directed three landmark plays - *Buang Keroh Pungut Jernih* (1985), *Biji Mata Mak* (1989) and *Tak Sangka*

(1990). He was also a famed composer of *pantons* (poems in Baba Malay) particularly in the *dondang sayang* (love ballads) genre.

**New KL chapter** In Kuala Lumpur, the Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor (PPBMKLS) was launched in October.

**Babazaar and peRUN!akan** In November, TPAS organised yet another successful Peranakan Festival. Highlights included a craft fair called *Babazaar*, a *Babalicious* food fair, non-stop performances, an art exhibition and *peRUN!akan*, an *Amazing Race*-style competition.

**Bedrooms in Malay and English** For almost a fortnight up to early December, the Association staged a contemporary drama called *Bedrooms* consecutively in Baba Malay and English, at the University Cultural Centre. Each language version featured a different cast and director, yielding two artistic perspectives on the same script.



Peranakans at National Day.



Little Nyonya.

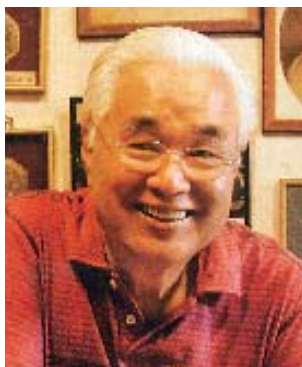


Baba William Tan.



## 2010 New TPAS President

In March, Baba Peter Wee was elected as the new TPAS President, taking over from Baba Lee Kip Lee who was appointed Life President in recognition of his long years of contribution to the Peranakan community.



Baba Peter Wee.



Baba Lee Kip Lee..



Baba Dr Goh Keng Swee.

**Farewell Dr Goh** In May, Singapore mourned the passing of Baba Dr Goh Keng Swee, former Deputy Prime Minister and one of the founding fathers of the nation. Dr Goh had held many key government portfolios and was the brilliant chief architect of Singapore's economic, defence and education policies.

**Farewell Felix** In July, Wayang Peranakan icon and author

Baba Felix Chia, also passed on. A ballroom dancer and renowned author, the dashing Baba played an integral role in reviving Peranakan culture in the mid-1980s.



Baba Felix Chia.

He wrote the very first play written and performed in Baba Malay, called *Pileh Menantu* (Choosing a Daughter-in-Law) in 1984. Baba Felix also wrote iconic books on Peranakan tradition such as *The Babas* (1980), *Ala Sayang* (1983) and *Reminiscences* (1984).



Nyonya Kwa Geok Choo.

**Farewell Mrs Lee** In October, Nyonya Kwa Geok Choo, the wife of Singapore's founding father and Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, passed away. Their life together over six decades was a true love story of two brilliant minds that began when she outperformed him in Raffles College and became his indispensable partner and



devoted soulmate throughout his political career.

### Baba Bling in Paris

October was also an exciting month as the Peranakan culture went to France with the Baba Bling exposition at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, featuring artefacts including ceramics and jewellery from Singapore's Peranakan Museum. The cultural showcase came complete with a traditional wedding procession, performances, cooking and beading demonstrations.

### GSA Centennial

In November, GSA celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a gala dinner at the Hilton Hotel.

## 2011 Farewell Lee Kip

**Lin** In July, Baba Lee Kip Lin, an architect and author known for his collection of

Singapore photographs and memorabilia, passed on. The brother of our Life President Baba Lee Kip Lee, his legacy lives on as the Lee Kip Lin

Collection, donated to the National Library.

**Bukit Brown furore** In September, the announcement of a dual-lane carriageway to cut across Bukit Brown Cemetery, Singapore's oldest, galvanised heritage lovers and many in the Peranakan community into action. Incensed campaigners vented against the proposal and many started documenting the graves, among which were buried notable pioneers of Singapore. Six months after the public furore, the authorities announced that out of the 100,000 or so graves, it would clear some 3,000 graves, fewer than the 5,000 in the original plan. International recognition of the precious heritage of Bukit

Brown - where the oldest grave dated back to 1833 - came in October 2013 when the cemetery was added to the World Monuments Watch List of Endangered Sites for 2014. Sadly, many cemeteries with graves of members of other communities are all gone.

### New Sydney chapter

Down Under, Peranakans in Sydney came together to launch their own association, the second in Australia after Melbourne.

### Joo Chiat is first Heritage Town

In October, Joo Chiat was recognised as Singapore's first Heritage Town by the National Heritage Board with the aim to promote a greater sense of community and the





## 2012 25<sup>th</sup> Baba Convention

In November, the Baba Convention celebrated its Silver or 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Malacca. Some 750 delegates attended, representing nine



Nyonya Margaret Chan as Emily.

associations from Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Melbourne, Sydney, Phuket, two groups from Indonesia, and even Kota Bharu in Kelantan.

### Restaging Emily

Written by Stella Kon in 1982 and first staged in 1984, *Emily of Emerald Hill* became the first play to be staged within a museum in Singapore when Dr

Margaret Chan, the first Singaporean to perform it (in 1985), re-staged the play to sold-out audiences at the Peranakan Museum in July. The one-woman play is about Emily Gan, a Peranakan woman, as she evolves from young bride to powerful matriarch in the mid-20th century. Emily remains the nation's most staged play, across four continents, seven countries, 17 cities, and at seven festivals worldwide. It has been interpreted by acclaimed Singaporean and Malaysian performers

like Margaret Chan, Pearly Chua, and Ivan Heng, as well as Leow Puay Tin, Neo Swee Lin, Aileen Lau, Jalyn Han, and Claire Wong.

## 2013

### Peranakans

**in Korea** From March to May, the cultural showcase, *The Peranakan World: Cross-Cultural Arts of Singapore and the Straits*, opened in Seoul, South Korea. The 230 objects on display gave Koreans a glimpse of our unique cross-cultural heritage.

### Ivan gets Cultural Medallion

Baba Ivan Heng, director of Wild Rice theatre company and actor extraordinaire, was awarded the Cultural Medallion for his contributions to the arts and culture. ❄



Baba Ivan Heng.

While no-one knows what the future holds, these milestones indicate a healthy interest in according the culture its due recognition. Such preservation and documentation is all well and good, but true

continuity lies in evolution. The next 20 years should see this magazine bearing witness to developments germinating from a new generation of millennial Peranakans.

Watch this space!

district's unique multicultural character.

### Farewell Chee Hood Siong

*Wayang Peranakan* lost another great actor with the passing of Chee Hood Siong in October. The Malaysian

actor was an exceptionally versatile performer renowned for his role as a *bibik*, partnering with Baba Kenny Chan since the early 1980s to perform in Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and even Hong Kong.



From left: Baba Chee Hong Siong, former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, Chee's long-time partner Kenny Chan and former Minister Ling Liong Sik.

Baba Lee Kip Lin.





#### THE OLD GUARD

Coming together after all these years: (back, from left) Anthony Oei, Alvin Yapp, Ian Yap, Peter Lee, Noreen Chan, Shia Ai Lee, (front, from left) Lee Kip Lee, Helen Tan.

(Unable to attend the photography session were Lim Geok Huay, David Ong, Maureen Lim, Heather Ong and Rita Tan.)

SPECIALLY PHOTOGRAPHED  
FOR THE PERANAKAN BY CHRIS YAP



# TEAM *TULIS*

## The editorial committee through the years

*The Peranakan* has been privileged to be the product of a core of dedicated members who stepped up and served as part of the editorial committee in one role or another over different periods in the past 20 years. They share with Nyonya Linda Chee recollections of working on past issues.

### Nyonya Helen Tan, Founding Committee Member

While putting together an editorial for the 3rd Baba Convention-cum-90th Anniversary Celebration Souvenir Magazine, which I was the Organising Chairman of, I was delighted to find several precious archival photos from past magazines dating back to *The Straits Chinese British Association*. I was also pleasantly surprised to see a group committee photo with Lee Kuan Yew, then a dashing young man serving as secretary in one of the many Peranakan Association's magazines in the then-President Baba TW Ong's office.



Many of these likes during that era were handsomely clothed in white or dark suits striking a terrific resemblance to the rich and famous. Nyonyas were also featured in their *kebayas* and finery in parties and functions perhaps by invitation only. It was a great privilege and I still enjoy reading *The Peranakan* regularly, now in its full glamour and colour. Congratulations!!

### Baba David Alexander Ong, Founding Committee Member

Looking back on those good old days (policemen wore shorts then), The Peranakan Association Singapore was but a very small organisation and I was First Vice-President for some years. The genesis of our present day very well written, and well illustrated and newsy Peranakan magazine, was a type-written circular and subsequently, the newsletters. This was sent out to members to remind them of the dates of luncheon meetings, Dinner get-togethers and other upcoming events and social activities, as well as to also briefly report on past events and activities.

The current editorial team members have indeed put in much effort to make *The Peranakan* the wonderfully informative, beautifully presented and newsy publication that it now is. I must congratulate and thank them for their untiring efforts. I wish The Peranakan Association, *The Peranakan* and all your members, all the very best for the future. You have indeed come a long way, since I became a member in the 1970s and I must thank all of you for that.



### Nyonya Maureen Lim, ex-Co-Editor

I was co-editor with Peter Lee from 1997 to 2004 and remained part of the "skeleton crew" committee in those early days when our magazine was a modest eight pages in black-and-white, accompanied by a few small photos. Costs had to be kept low as the publication ran without any advertisements. Long before anyone talked about toponymics, Uncle Kip was already writing on the origins of local street names.

In 2000, to mark the 100th anniversary of The Peranakan Association, I did a feature on five of the oldest members, whose lives had spanned the same century as the Association - Baba Seow Sian Chye (born 1908), Baba Tan Choon Keng (born 1909), Bibik Josephine Tan Pin Neo (born 1914, and also Baba Peter Wee's mother), Bibik Annie Yeo Chee Chee (born 1917) and Baba Chia Chin Siang (born 1919). They may not have been in the forefront of events, but they were the Association's pioneer supporters. Sadly, some have passed away, but in the July-Sept 2000 issue, their smiles and stories live on.

Now here we are, marking 20 years of - to use an old cliché - news, views and interviews. And what a leap forward it has been, from the earliest, two-page stapled sheets to the collectible that it has become.

So is this the happily-ever-after ending for *The Peranakan*? Since this is NOT just a fairytale, somehow I don't think we have quite turned the last page just yet. And that's a very good thing.

### Baba Anthony Oei, ex-Committee Member

I was appointed by then Association President Lee Kip Lee when he learnt that I was a former journalist. My beat was covering events like the AGM and the Baba conventions, and occasionally, writing a feature article. It was fun working for the magazine. I enjoyed a good working relationship with the other writers. I hope my stories benefited our fellow-members. I'm no longer in the editorial team. It's just as well, because today we have better

writers with better ideas. Indeed, the magazine has improved by leaps and bounds, boasting a bright design and interesting articles. I enjoy reading them.

The magazine looks very professional. Kudos to the editorial team. I'm sure you'll continue to improve it by giving us stories of enduring interest about the Peranakan culture and by keeping the layout constantly fresh, in tune with the times. Keep up the good work. We appreciate what you're doing.

### Nyonya Shia Ai Lee, ex-Advertising Manager

I was in charge of advertising from 1999 to 2004. It gave me a chance to speak to vendors and suppliers who would be interested to advertise. When the magazine first started its print, it was done in black and white, due to budget constraint. It was great to see the colour prints later in 2002, with generous donations received.

Nowadays, I would bring the magazine to read everywhere I go, as there are many interesting articles in it. It is also easy to get people to become members (for life) and start receiving the magazine for free. It has now become a keepsake for many members, including myself.



### Nyonya Heather Ong, ex-Committee Member

I am heartened to see the changes that have taken place. The magazine has matured through the years, and grown in sophistication. It is a useful resource for friends and students who need information about the Peranakan culture, and our homesick relatives often request copies whenever we visit them abroad. My 89-year old mother lovingly tends to her stack, and she has devised an internal "filing system" in her mind. Mention a topic, and she will be able to show you the relevant article from a past issue of *The Peranakan*!

I contributed regularly to the magazine from 1998 to 2004. It was an exciting time, as I was in the first committee that catered to the youth. Through the newsletter, we managed to create awareness among the younger set, and increase our numbers. There was much to write about, as

# chakap chakap

perANAKan organized many youth-oriented cultural activities and heritage tours, incorporating workshops on our language, our cuisine and our crafts. We made it a point to learn from the elders, so we worked hand-in-hand with them to promote the culture through music, dance, food and lifestyles.

Like our Peranakan culture, the magazine continues to build on a centuries-old foundation, yet keeps itself relevant to present day readers. As soon as I receive my quarterly magazine in the mail, a quick look will whet my appetite for what's in store. Come the weekend, I'll be spending a languid afternoon with a cup of fragrant *kopi*, my favourite *kueh* and *The Peranakan*, enjoying every page of it. Happy 20th Anniversary! I look forward to many more!

## Nyonya Noreen Chan, ex-Committee member



My first encounter with *The Peranakan* magazine was back in 2000, as part of a feature on young Peranakans. It wasn't until a few years later that I began contributing to the magazine. I came up with the idea of writing about our food, featuring family recipes and the stories around them, as well as the unique characteristics of nyonya cuisine. That's how *Dalam Dapur* was born.

Over the years it has been very encouraging to see the magazine develop in terms of range and depth of articles

**“My 89-year mother lovingly tends to her stack (of magazines), and she has devised an internal ‘filing system’ in her mind. Mention a topic, and she will be able to show you the relevant article from a past issue of *The Peranakan*!”**

*-Nyonya Heather Ong*

published. It is wonderful to know that so many people are passionate about Peranakan culture, and sharing that passion with a wider audience. I have not been so active of late, but look forward to receiving every issue. And it's heartening to see that as far as *The Peranakan* is concerned,

*dapur masi ada berasap* (there is still smoke in the kitchen)!

## Baba Ian Yap, ex-Art Director

The first time I read the association newsletter was in the early 90s. It was in black and white and photocopied on single sheets of paper. I had a small design company then and Peter Lee used to come in to work on it. He



would spend hours over a first-generation Macintosh (above) writing, designing and printing the newsletter by himself. I had very little knowledge then, of the association

and was intrigued by it. I can't recall the first article I read but I was hooked after going through one of the issues. As a Baba myself, the articles about Peranakan history and culture stirred up my interest in my roots. I also discovered my grand uncle was a former president of the association. From then on, I took a very keen interest.

As a visual person I offered to help with the layout and design. We wanted to give the newsletter a magazine feel and knew that having photos and graphics would make a big difference. We also wanted a good mix of new and vintage



photographs and because of budget constraints we had to double up as photographers as well. We wanted a fresh, vibrant

and modern look to the cover. It needed to be relevant to the times and appealing to a younger generation of readers. Like everything else in life, *The Peranakan* will constantly be changing and its evolution will see it last another 100 years.

## Baba Alvin Yapp, ex-Advertising Manager

When I first joined the committee in 2005, the newsletter was in black and white. Each member was only allowed to have ONE copy while advertisers were entitled to two copies. There were three advertisers, namely Guan Antiques, Katong Antique House and Rumah Bebe. After much justification, we were given the green light by the Association to double our circulation and turn the magazine into full colour. Immediately we saw a jump in advertisers, sometimes up to 15 advertisers per issue!



Our advertisers range from antique dealers to Peranakan food restaurants. Some of our more colourful advertisers included a mortician and a Brazilian wax studio! One Association member told me he looked forward to receiving the magazine to see what the antique dealers advertised more so than the articles in the magazine! It would be wonderful to see the magazine being sold on newstand shelves one day, alongside other cultural and heritage magazines such as *Arts of Asia*. Congratulations to *The Peranakan* committee for sustaining the credibility and professionalism of the magazine! \*

## FROM NEWSLETTER TO MAGAZINE

In the early 1990s Dr Wee Kim Wee, Singapore's first Peranakan President and once a journalist, had mooted the idea of a periodical for all Peranakans. His daughter, Wee Eng Hwa, remembers vividly: "I remember he was very much in support of the idea that the Association should have a quality magazine to project a solid public image of the Association and its objective – to inform about Peranakan culture; to keep the Peranakan cultural heritage alive and relevant and to encourage Peranakans to stay connected."

Dr Wee, formerly Deputy Editor of *The Straits Times*, knew from first-hand experience the effect of a good quality

periodical, having also published magazines for SATA (Singapore Anti-tuberculosis Association), where he was the Chairman, and "the Useful Badminton Party, the only pre-war badminton party which I believe is still in existence today. As was his nature, he had a heart for people, even in the magazine - he squeezed in half a page of humorous badminton-related jokes, perhaps to lighten the reader's life during the Great Depression." "It was no surprise to me that my father threw his weight behind Lee Kip Lee to pursue this magazine project. I understand that he gave the association some good ideas and guidance on the 'how to'."

Taking up the challenge, in June 1994 The Peranakan Association Singapore gave life to a humble two-page Xeroxed







#### THE EDITORIAL COMMITTEE TODAY

The current committee members:  
(back, from left) Alvin Sng, Peter  
Lee, Emeric Lau, Colin Chee, Low  
Whee Hoon, (front, from left) Lee  
Kip Lee, Linda Chee, John Lee.

publication called *The Peranakan Association Newsletter*. Two years later, it was renamed *The Peranakan* to give the newsletter a more distinct identity. It also became a regular quarterly with a wide range of reports covering recipes, cultural documentation, news and viewpoints to theatre reviews. In the Association's centennial year 2000, the newsletter graduated to a full-fledged black-and-white illustrated magazine with the front and back covers in full colour.

Backed by a very active team of volunteers running the publication, the magazine became an important communication platform for the Peranakan community. By year-end 2005, *The Peranakan* was on a roll. It went full colour in all pages and assumed a fresh new look. Doubling to 32 pages,

it featured more articles, photographs, illustrations and advertisements. At the end of 2006, the magazine hit a bumper 44 pages for the first time. Its print run hit a record 4,000 copies.

The magazine continues to be produced by volunteers. It is distributed to the Association's 1,900 members and a variety of locations including museums and Singapore Tourism Board locations where they are eagerly picked up by culture buffs.

Adds Eng Hwa: "If he were alive today, I have no doubt my father would be the first to congratulate the association and its editorial teams through the two decades for a job well done. *The Peranakan* has contributed much to our Peranakan heritage. It is something we can be proud of." ❖

**Baba Lee Kip Lee,**  
*Editorial Adviser and Founding  
Member (since 1994)*

**Baba Peter Lee,**  
*Editorial Adviser and Founding  
Member (since 1994)*

**Nyonya Linda Chee,**  
*Editor (since 2005)*

**Baba Colin Chee,**  
*Editorial and Photography Committee  
Member (since 2005)*

**Nyonya Low Whee Hoon,**  
*Administrative Manager (since 2005)*

**Baba Emeric Lau,**  
*Assistant Editor (since 2006)*

**Baba John Lee,**  
*Art Director (since 2011)*

**Baba Alvin Sng,**  
*Advertising Manager (since 2012)*





# HORSING AROUND



*The Headless Horseman. A lead figurine, possibly from the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century, excavated from Empress Place in 1998, and now in the National Museum.*

The year of the horse is upon us again, a timely moment for Baba Peter Lee to muse on Peranakans and their equine connections





A Chinese Peranakan family in a barouche, Java, circa 1900.

# WITH THE BABAS

As someone who has no interest in what happens at the Turf Club, the only time in the recent past that horses galloped into my consciousness was when the scandal broke out about horse meat being added to beef patties. I was so relieved that I had stopped eating beef (or at least what I thought was beef) twenty years ago! I grew up in a household where no one was particularly interested in sporty pursuits such as horse-riding, or in literary ones concerning Pegasus and Greek mythology. Therefore, my idea of horses came mostly from Hollywood. That old classic *Black Beauty* with the young Elizabeth Taylor must have been televised so many times when I was a

child, but I do not recall ever watching it to the end! What was it all about? Much more memorable was the 1960s comedy series *Mr Ed the Talking Horse*. However the one, truly unforgettable screen image of a horse, the sight of which transformed my life forever, was that blood-soaked horse head lying cosily under the blanket in *The Godfather* (a real decapitated horse head was used, by the way). Having grown up a Peranakan with some knowledge of English, Cantonese, Malay and Hokkien, I was always fascinated by The Sandpipers' 1971 whispery, cheezy hit with its Japanese title, *Chotto Matte Kudasai*, and its bewildering Malay-Hokkien reference to horse excrement.



## TRADITION

How horses have vanished from the modern Singaporean consciousness. The oldest horse in Singapore is of course the lead figurine in the National Museum, dubbed *The Headless Horseman*. It was discovered in 1998 by archaeologist and historian Dr John Miksic, who suggests it was brought over from Java in the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century. Horses of course played a fundamental role in everyone's lives before the advent of the car, and therefore figured as a symbol in various aspects of culture. It is as everyone knows, the seventh animal of the Chinese zodiac and in astrological terms, is considered to have a *yang* or masculine aspect, and is associated with the earthly branch *wu* (午, or *ngo* in Hokkien), the cardinal direction of the south, the season of summer and the fire element. The fifth lunar month, also associated with *wu* is known as the horse month. The horse hour is also known as *wu*, the hour from 11 am to noon. All this is of course meaningless to most of us today, but to the Peranakans of old, many of whom were obsessively superstitious, the date and hour of one's birth were calculated and assessed for whether they had a benign or malign effect on one's parents' horoscope. This often determined whether a child should be tenderly loved or discarded to some relative, or even whether one should cut one's hair or nails on a particular day, or eat beef. In fact, I tell a lie when I say all this zodiac mumbo-jumbo is meaningless today, because I do confess that I stopped eating beef (or horse, or whatever), because a fortune teller advised me to! Well, I suppose that is the fallible, gullible Peranakan in me.

In Peranakan tradition, vestiges of the ancient past when horses were part of daily life can be found in certain old Hokkien customs. The *khi-be* (騎馬, 'mounting the horse') ceremony and the feast, the *khi-be-tok* (騎馬桌), part of the Peranakan wedding, was a meal given to the groom by his parents just before his departure for the bride's house. Sometimes paper horses were burnt as funeral offerings. These were known as *sia-be* (赦馬). For deities such as the Datok Dapor (Kitchen God), sheets of paper offerings each stamped with an image of a horse that were known as *hun-be* (魂馬, or *hoon bay*, 'spirit horse') or *hun-be-tsoa* (魂馬紙, 'spirit horse paper'), were



A European lady in riding habit seated on a horse, Singapore, 1860s. Photograph by August Sachtlér

A pony and carriage in front of the Thian Hock Keng, Singapore, 1890s. Detail of a photograph by August Kaulfuss.



burnt on the day of his ascent into heaven (24<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month) and upon his return to earth (4<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month). Nowadays for such offerings sold at the shops, one is more likely to see a *hun-ferrari*, or maybe even a *hun-A380*! There is also a Daoist heavenly being known as *Be Chong-kun* (馬將軍, horse general) or *Be-ya* (馬爺, Lord Horse), and a spiritual emissary known as *Be Sai-ya* (馬使爺, Lord Ambassador Horse), but there is some confusion regarding their identity. In some communities they are deified historical figures with the surname *Be* (馬), but in some cases they are patron saints for coachmen and cart drivers.

In Baba Malay, several amusing terms concern the *kuda* (horse). Baba William Gwee Thian Hock lists the following phrases in *Mas Sepuloh* (1993) and *A Baba Malay Dictionary* (2006):

**kuda belang:** zebra (striped horse); derogatory slang for Teochew people (!)

**kuda empat kaki lagik jatoh:** even a horse with four legs can fall; even the mighty can fall

**kuda-kuda:** brackets for a platform or shelf; roof truss

**kuda lumba:** racehorse

**kuda pasang:** pair of horses; two people amorously chasing after the same person

**kuda sandi:** an ill-tempered horse (often used to describe a person in a bad mood)

**kudakan:** to slave away for another

Another common term, *kachang kuda* refers to the chickpea, perhaps because it was fed to horses.

## MODERN TRANSPORT

Horses, being essential to transport, appeared in Singapore from the earliest days. Ponies and horses were sourced from the islands of the archipelago such as Bali, and Sulawesi and Savu in eastern Indonesia (*Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register*, 5 September 1833, p. 6; *Straits*

*Times*, 8 February 1889, p. 2). The Deli pony seemed to have been held in high regard, and was exported out of Deli, in north Sumatra, although it originated in the Batak highlands. There was also a different breed called a Batak pony, but both breeds were known in Malay as *kuda Batak* (horses of the Batak highlands, Sumatra). Batavia was the origin of some horse imports (*Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 10 September 1836, p. 7, and 11 May



1837, p. 3.). The Baba Malay word for a carriage or cart was, as we know, *kreta*, which is from the Portuguese *carrêta*. In Hokkien it was known as a *be-chia* (馬車, horse carriage) or *gu-chia* (牛車, ox-carriage or cart). The old names of Singapore's Chinatown, *Kreta Ayer* (water cart) and *Gu Chia Chui* (牛車水), apparently referred to the ox or bullock carts used to collect water from Ann Siang Hill to the surrounding neighbourhoods.

In Baba Malay, there was only one generic term for any fancy horse-drawn carriage, *kreta jori*, but in fact there was an astonishing array of such carts and carriages throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Singapore. The terms found in the English language newspapers of Singapore reveal the range of modern transport available:

**Barouche:** a carriage for four, seated face to face, with low sides and a collapsible half-hood, that is, only at the back.

**Brougham:** four-wheeled enclosed carriage for two passengers with a glassed window at the front of the carriage.

**Buggy:** two-wheeled carriage for two passengers with a collapsible hood, also called a roadster.

**Bullock:** cart used for transportation, originally an ox-drawn cart.

**Carriage:** a generic term for a horse-drawn passenger vehicle.

**Chaise:** a small two- or four-wheeled carriage for one or two people with a collapsible hood.

**Coach:** enclosed four-wheeled carriage with two windowed doors for four passengers seated face to face.

**Curricule:** a two-wheeled chaise for two passengers.

**Dogcart:** an open carriage with a high bench where passengers sit back to back.

**Gharry:** a covered hard top carriage for four seated face to face, originating in India.

**Gig:** a more streamlined version of a chaise.

**Landau:** a covered hard or soft top carriage originating in Germany, for four passengers seated face to face, the soft top version with two collapsible hoods.

**Palankeen or palanquin:** covered hard top coach with louvred and glassed windows.

**Phaeton:** a sporty open carriage with four large wheels for one or two passengers.

**Tanga or tonga:** a two-wheeled carriage for two or four passengers with a fixed soft top, originating in India.

**Victoria:** an open carriage based on a phaeton with a collapsible hood, and a coachman's box-seat at the front.

The old forms of horse-drawn public transport were the hackney carriage (hacks), the later hansom cabriolet (cab for short). When the cab was installed with a mechanical device that calibrated fares based on the distance travelled, known as taximeters, the term *taxicab* came into use. The omnibus was a large carriage that could carry many passengers, and was of course, the predecessor of the modern bus.

Naturally, horses and carriages became big business in Singapore, and the newspapers are replete with a whole range of

advertisements placed by horse dealers (who, like a certain Cook and Company, also doubled up as veterinarians). In the 1880s, illegal horse-trading was rampant in Commercial Square, or what is now Raffles Place (*Straits Times*, 9 May 1885, p. 2). Lambert Brothers, established 1862, were coach builders at Coleman Street and later Orchard Road (*Straits Times*, 28 August 1869, p. 3; *Straits Times*, 1 March 1889, p. 6).

## SHOWING OFF

Such carriages were especially useful to wealthy Peranakans who owned country villas far from the centre of town. The English traveller Isabella Bird visited Malacca in 1879 and noted that "Every afternoon their carriages roll out into the country, conveying them to their substantial bungalows to smoke and gamble." (Isabella Bird, *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither*, 1883, p. 120.) The photographer John Thomson also noted the Babas' love of showing



off grand carriages:

"A fine specimen of the Anglo-Chinese shopkeeper is Boon; tall and portly withal; but while he courts your patronage, you find yourself instinctively turned towards the splendid carriage and pair which has just drawn up at his door; and your surprise is great when Boon Eng himself – for it is just closing time – lights a cigar; steps into the vehicle, and is driven swiftly off by his Malay coachman to some pleasant villa in the country." (John Thomson, *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China and China, or Ten Years' Travels, Adventures and Residence Abroad*, 1875, p. 57.)

Small carriages were also acquired for young Peranakan passengers, but these were drawn not by horses or ponies, but by household servants. Isabella Bird observed a grand custom in Malacca during the Chinese New Year when such carriages were paraded on the streets: "At eleven all the Chinese children came forth in carriages shaped like boats, turned up at both ends, painted red and yellow, and with white-fringed canopies over them. These

*Carriages and rickshaws crowd the pathway of a Chingay procession, perhaps in front of Empress Place, Singapore, circa 1900.*





Peranakan children seated in small carriages, dressed for the Chinese New Year, Malacca, 1860s. The head of the family, a Baba dressed in Chinese costume and a straw boater, stands proudly before the carriages, while servants, who have been tasked to draw the carriages, wait in attendance. Detail of a photograph by August Sachtler.

were drawn by servants, and in the case of the very wealthy, a train of servants accompanied each carriage. It was a sight worthy of a fabled age." (Isabella Bird 1883, p. 144). The photographer August Sachtler captured such a Malacca scene earlier in the 1860s. In the photograph, children decked out in

their finery, some however forgetting their shoes, are all squeezed into tiny canopied carriages, surrounded by some bare-chested servants. The portly Baba patriarch in his *baju hock chiew* and a fashionable straw boater, one hand leaning on a *payong* (umbrella), stands proudly before the carriages.

## ACCIDENTS

However coachmen back then were as bad as drivers are today in Singapore, and carriage accidents, like car accidents, were very common, and often involved Babas and Nyonyas.

"Yesterday morning at 7.30 am a horse which had strayed from the stables of a Chinaman residing in Boat Quay whilst running down Church Street at a furious rate caused a fatal accident." (*Straits Times*, 3 October 1865, p. 2)

"About 2pm yesterday a horse drawing a carriage containing a number of Chinese nonias took fright at a steam wagon near the Detective Station and bolted. The carriage ran into a drain and was smashed. The

women were fortunately not much hurt. The horse escaped without any injuries. (*Straits Times*, 7 November 1903, p. 4)

"On Saturday morning a horse ran away with a private gharry containing a Chinese Nonia. The horse bolted down New Bridge Road and in the vicinity of the Warders' Quarters at the Sepoy Lines, jumped over the railway embankment, which here is fully six feet high. The horse escaped with a few scratches, but the gharry was overturned and the Nonia received a severe cut on her head. The syce escaped injury, but the carriage was badly damaged." (*Eastern Daily*

*Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser*, 4 October 1905, p. 3.)

Perhaps one of the most tragic carriage accidents happened in Penang in October 1913, when the syce fell off his victoria drawn by a Deli pony along Light Street, which then careened off on its own towards Swettenham Wharf before dropping into the sea with all its five passengers: Mrs Lim Poon Chin and her two daughters, and Mrs Cheah Eng Kee and her son. All the young children perished in this tragic incident (*Straits Times*, 13 October 1913, p. 10).

## RACES

Peranakans were also avidly involved in horse racing (and of course, gambling).

*Tan Chong Chew, the eldest son of the Penang and Singapore tycoon Tan Kheam Hock, with his trophy, winning horse and jockey, at the race course in Serangoon, Singapore, circa 1920s. Photograph by Light Studios, Singapore.*





Dr Lye Wai Choong contributed a fascinating article documenting this history to this very magazine some eight years ago ("The Racy Peranakans", *The Peranakan*, October-December 2005, pp.14-17). He informs us that horse racing began in Singapore on 23 February 1843, and the most prestigious events were organised by the Singapore Sporting Club at the race course in Serangoon, now the field along Race Course Road. The Penang Turf Club was established in 1867. By the turn of the century, a few wealthy Babas, such as Lee Toon Teck of Penang, and Tan Kim Ching and his son Tan Boo Liat of Singapore, began owning racehorses and winning trophies. From the 1920s, races became part of social life, and many more Straits Chinese (many of them sons of millionaires) became involved in racehorses, such as Alan Loke (son of Kuala Lumpur tycoon Loke Yew), Tan Chong Chew (son of Penang business leader Tan Kheam Hock), Chee Soon Keng, Lim Chong Pang (son of the 'Pineapple King' Lim Nee Soon), entrepreneur Lee Kim Puat, among many others.

### STABLES REVISITED

Amazingly, there are still some discreet old families that not only have their old stables and carriage houses, but even their old family carriages, large and small. In Penang, old mews houses (the carriage houses and quarters for the coachmen) have been cleverly and stylishly converted by hotelier Christopher Ong into contemporary boutique hotels. Given there are riding clubs and polo clubs in Singapore today; but the simplest, and to me the most perfectly blissful, way to connect with your inner horse is to fly to Penang and stay at Ong's Muntri Mews and Noordin Mews (visit [www.muntrimews.com](http://www.muntrimews.com) and [www.noordinmews.com](http://www.noordinmews.com)). ❀

*All other photographs from the Mr & Mrs Lee Kip Lee collection.*



Herbert Lim, grandson of Mrs Lee Choon Guan, and his winning horse at the Singapore Turf Club, Bukit Timah, 1950s.

Society doyenne and benefactor Mrs Lee Choon Guan (right, with parasol in hand) and her friends at the races, Serangoon Road Race Course, late 1920s. Seated next to her on the raised bench is Mrs SQ Wong. SQ Wong, a prominent lawyer and businessman, and president of the Straits Chinese British Association in 1924, is seated at the end of the bench, wearing a topi or pith helmet. Photograph courtesy of Mrs Ivy Kwa.



# PRIZED SILVER

Jackie Yoong and Benjamin Kyle Chiesa highlight a silver decanter recently donated to the Peranakan Museum

*This silver decanter, circa 1888, was used as a horse racing trophy and was made by the silversmiths Hoaching in Guangzhou, China. It stands at a height of 35cm and was a recent gift of Professor Cheah Jin Seng to the Peranakan Museum. According to Museum curators Jackie Yoong and Benjamin Kyle Chiesa, the shape and the bamboo-leaf decoration derive from Chinese sources. The form may be based on vases popular in the Yuan dynasty (1280–1367), illustrating the long tradition of silver working in China. Hoaching also produced lacquerware, ivory carvings, and jewellery. The shield is inscribed: Ledger cup/ Amoy Races / 1888 – 1889 / Silvery Dawn / J R H. Amoy (now known as Xiamen) was one of the Five Treaty Ports opened after the end of the First Opium War (1839–42), and winners of the horseraces there were often awarded silver trophies or vessels inscribed with the name of the victorious horse. The three marks on the base of the vessel are the H of Hoaching and two Chinese characters, 仪昌 (yí chāng). Chinese silversmiths began producing large amounts of objects for export in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Most of the objects were ordered by Western traders who came to China to look for porcelain, silk, tea and other precious objects. ❀*

Silver decanter used as a racing trophy, circa 1888, made by the silversmiths Hoaching in Guangzhou, China. Height 35cm.





# PORTRAYING THE PAST

The NUS Museum exhibits Peranakan portraits

In this exhibition of Peranakan family portraits dating from the late 1800s, there is just one painting of a nyonya in a kebaya. Wearing the form-fitting sarong kebaya was seen to be as daring as wearing a mini skirt at one point in history, says Foo Su Ling, of the outfit everyone associates with the Peranakan community.

Ms Foo curated *Inherited & Salvaged: Portraits from the Straits Chinese Collection*, which opened on 27 November at the National University of Singapore Museum.

That sole portrait from 1949 shows an unnamed woman in a cream lace kebaya from Java, Indonesia. Other pieces depict Peranakan women in the *baju koon-sah* and even the *baju kurung*.

There are 57 pieces on display dating from the late 1800s to early 1900s. The collection represents the effort of Baba Peter Lee, honorary curator of NUS Baba House. Over a period of several years, he actively sought and collected oil and photographic portraits from sources in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, which have been grouped under gift in the name of his aunt, Agnes Tan.

The subjects of the portraits vary from individuals to couples, from known to unidentified personalities. A coherent grouping of portraits can be attributed to the Wee family, consisting of



*Portrait of Man in Chinese Jacket and Gown; artist unknown; Indonesia (Java).*

*Portrait of Lady in Baju Kurung and Sarong in Traditional Batik Passir Style; artist unknown; Indonesia (Java). Both portraits gifts of Agnes Tan Kim Lwi.*

Wee Boon Teck, his grandson Wee Eng Cheng who owned 157 Neil Road, and Wee Eng Cheng's mother Goh Boh Tan. Identities of the subjects depicted are generally confirmed through the acquisition sources.

Still, many of the subjects depicted will likely remain unidentifiable.

Nevertheless, they are indicative of the range of materials and

pictorial conventions – from oils to inks, photographs and coloured photographs – providing potential insights into their production and use. ❖

*Inherited & Salvaged: Portraits from the Straits Chinese Collection runs till 6 July 2014 at the NUS Museum.*







## PIECES OF PERANAKAN HERITAGE

If you appreciate the beauty of Peranakan art, here's a way to help preserve it. They

can help you adorn your walls or furniture with these tiles, many of which feature the exquisite motifs of birds and flowers commonly found in old Peranakan homes.

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# PRODUCTIVE COLLABORATION

Baba Emeric Lau reviews *Kebon Indah*, an exhibition of textile artworks by contemporary artists and traditional batik makers

**K**ebon Indah is the second in a series of exhibitions by the NUS Baba House that examines portraiture and representations of the self (the first was *Dressing the Baba*). The artworks in this instalment comprise textiles that include the photographed faces of the batik makers of Sido Luhur by means of cyanotype, and also showcase their talents in *batik tulis*. The pieces are at once personal and personalised; equal parts creations and records of their creators.

The lengthy period and organic process of collaboration between contemporary artists Mintio and Kabul and the batik makers is documented in an essay by curator Foo Su Ling in the exhibition's book. The batik makers engaged Mintio and Kabul by sharing their personal recollections. Sometimes, compromises had to be made in the process of creation, such as utilising the available colour dyes rather than waiting for the next dye cycle. In the same publication, Amalinda Savirani, lecturer at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, examines the faceless, marginalised position of Indonesian batik makers, "In picturing the photos of the batik women with their children and the cross-generational relationships of the batik makers onto fabric, Mintio and Kabul have created a space for the batik makers to appear and exist in the batik discourse. For the batik makers to present their work as something of their own identity is a situation that may never happen in their imaginations throughout their entire lives in their craft." This raises more questions: batik is an art form, yet recognition usually goes to batik collectors, or at most, to the regions and workshops responsible for evolving particular designs. What about the artists themselves?

Batik production is a collective effort. The systems of production and widespread distribution render the eventual consumers distant and thus ignorant of the individual artists behind each piece. In a way, the exhibition forces the customer to



*The exhibition forces the customer to come face-to-face with the oft-unknown batik artist.*

come face-to-face with the neglected artist. We need to recognise the great potential and power of such an exchange. Accountability is the key. A thorough audit should be conducted of the thousands of batik makers

throughout Indonesia, and mechanisms initiated to ensure fair trade and due recognition, so that the art of batik can continue to flourish.

For now, the batik artists of Sido Luhur take pride in knowing that their unique work is being exhibited. They also delight in pointing visitors to a youtube video made by Mintio and Kabul. Just google "*malam di jari kita*". ❄



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# A SMASHING TIME

Nyonya Maria Khoo Joseph tosses her ceramic into the void of the Peranakan Museum's first contemporary art exhibition

From 21 June to 22 September 2013, the Peranakan Museum played host to *Luminous Depths* by Taiwanese-American artist Lee Mingwei. The exhibition invited visitors to participate, and in so doing explore ideas about memories, objects, collecting, and how they come together in a museum.

A cylindrical structure was designed by Lee in consultation with an architectural design firm, and built within the atrium of the museum. It was made up of four metal hoops joined together by strings of white cotton rope. The base of the structure was constructed from translucent acrylic boards lined up to fit within the circumference of the atrium. The ropes drew the eye and mimicked the rays of light that cascades through the building. Upon entering, visitors were greeted with the sight of a brown, tiled table near the entrance, with ceramic pieces laid out on it. Behind the table, the cylinder shielded any view into the bottom of the main structure; one could only peer in from the floors above. The Schubert lieder, *Nacht und Träume*, played from the third story of the atrium and could be heard faintly from the ground floor.

Infusing contemporary art into the museum is a means of inviting new perspectives, offering different ways of looking and thinking about art.

This installation dealt with rebirth through destruction. Throughout the three-month run of the installation,

*A view of the cylindrical structure designed by Lee Mingwei.*



*A view of the smashed pieces collecting at the bottom of the atrium.*

*Lee Mingwei tosses a ceramic piece into the cylinder.*

many visitors eagerly participated and engaged with the artwork. Young and old, Singaporeans and tourists, were invited to select and purchase a ceramic object specially designed by the artist. Each object was sold

for \$5, and this money was collected to begin a fund with which the museum will acquire a Peranakan object for the collection.

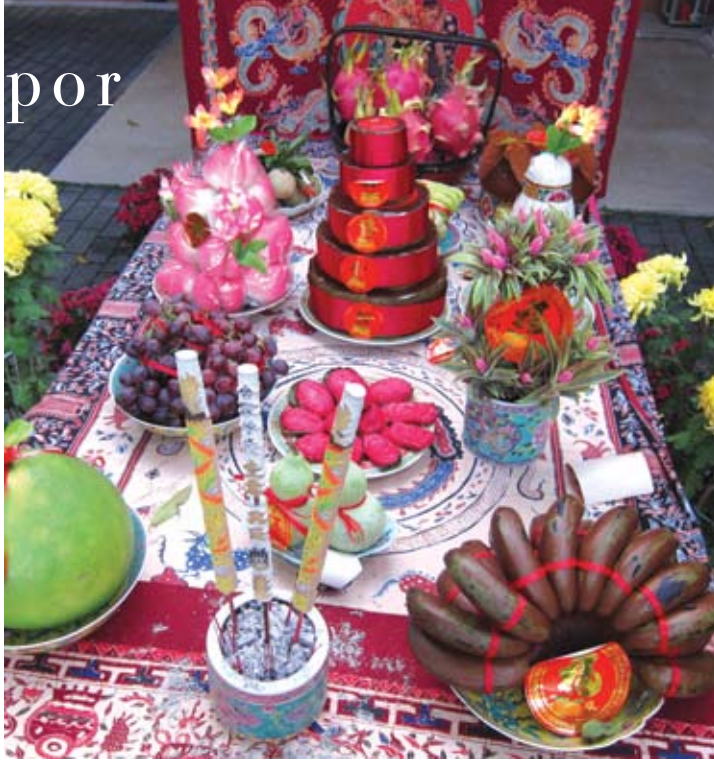
They were then asked to carry their small work of art as they walked through the museum, looking at the objects on display as part of the museum's permanent collection, until they reached the top floor. There they were instructed to remove their footwear and mount a platform, facing the top of the structure, which was a large hoop suspended diagonally over the atrium. When a visitor stepped up on the platform, the music would stop. This created the feeling of being on stage, and also allowed the visitor a moment of reflection before tossing the ceramic into the void, to crash and shatter at the bottom.

After the run of the installation, Lee collected boxes of shards from the bottom of the pit. Some will be buried in the foundation of the new wing of the Asian Civilisations Museum, the sister institution of the Peranakan Museum. Others might be displayed in the Peranakan Museum. ❄

*Nyonya Maria is a curator at the Peranakan Museum.*







Photography by John Lee.

# CAKE FOR THE GODS

Baba Tan Kuning explains the significance  
of the *kueh bakol* in ushering in the Lunar New Year

**K**ueh bakol, literally translated as basket cake, is the most important item in Lunar New Year rituals as it is the main offering to the kitchen god (*datok dapur*) and ancestors. The name of this steamed rice flour cake is derived from its rounded shape. Kueh bakol is called *ti kueh*, or sweet cake, in the Hokkien dialect. In Mandarin it is called *nien gao* which means New Year cake, a most appropriate name for the cake of the season.

Kueh bakol is offered for prayers (*semayang*) one week before the New

Year, ie the 24<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month, when the kitchen god is believed to ascend to heaven to report on the affairs of the world to Ti Kong, the Jade Emperor. On the 9<sup>th</sup> day of the New Year, another round of kueh bakol is offered, this time to Ti Kong.

While the various savoury dishes, fruits and cakes are placed on the altar table for about two hours or so during the prayers, the kueh bakol stays on the altar for 10 days. It is removed only on the 4<sup>th</sup> day of the New Year when the kitchen god

returns to earth. This is why kueh bakol is never served together with cookies to friends and relatives visiting during the initial days of the New Year.

Family in mourning for matriarch or patriarch who had passed away earlier in the year can neither make the offering of kueh bakol nor celebrate the New Year. No visiting or visits by relatives and friends either. The parents (*chinkeh* and *chek em*) of the sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, and close neighbours are then obliged to make a

token gift of one kueh bakol each to the family in mourning.

## Making the kueh bakol

Few families make their own kueh bakol today because lots of prohibitions (*pantang*) have to be observed. The toughest *pantang* perhaps is for the extended family to not quarrel or argue when the kueh is being prepared. It is said that negative words cause the kueh to spoil - the surface will turn out rough or uneven instead of being smooth and glistening.

Steaming kueh bakol also requires much skill.

As the *bibiks* used to say: "Moh chuey kueh bakol mesti pande jaga ayer, jaga api." (If you want to steam kueh bakol, the skill is in controlling the water and fire.)

Making kueh bakol is a labour-intensive process. It takes days of preparation before the steaming commences. In the old days, people made their own glutinous rice flour. I heard that the rice was pounded in a wooden mortar with a pair of pestles each about five feet long. Two women would stand facing each other to rhythmically pound the rice. The rice was then sieved in batches to gather the fine powder. The



Photography by Lee Yuen Thien.



remaining coarse grains were pounded again and again and sieved until all the rice became fine flour. Nothing was wasted. The flour was then kept in an airtight tin.

The *kueh* usually came in two sizes. The half-kati *kueh* was steamed in a tin with a 12cm diameter and 8cm depth. The one-kati *kueh* was made in a 15cm-diameter tin with a depth of 10cm. On the day of steaming the *kueh*, fresh banana leaves were cut into 6cm or 7cm squares and wiped clean before being placed on a piece of zinc over a slow fire to soften and dry them. The tins were lined with the leaves to form a 'basket' for the filling.

Unlike the western method of precise quantities for ingredients, those who make *kueh bakol* at home usually *agak agak* or estimate the quantities of ingredients based on experience and instinct. It has been a fruitless search to find a recipe with specific quantities. One friend heard that equal parts of one kati glutinous rice flour and one kati white sugar were used.

### Preparing *kueh bakol* in the *chye tng*

The method of making *kueh bakol* here was described to me by a lady of about 60 years old who lives in a *chye tng*, that is, a Taoist temple, devoted to Guan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy.

From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *chye tng* had been selling high quality *kueh bakol* during the Chinese New Year season to its devotees. Ten years ago it stopped production due to a shortage of manpower. From about 15 female residents, comprising widows and single women, the *chye tng* now has only five women staying there. Today, the temple sources commercially produced *kueh bakol* from a factory.

At the *chye tng*, the white sugar was melted with water into syrup. The syrup was poured into the bowl of glutinous rice flour a bit at a time and mixed well into a batter (*gaul tepong*) using the fingers. The batter would be sufficiently fluid when it flowed through the fingers. The mixture was poured into the tins lined with leaves.

About 10 tins were placed into one circular bamboo steaming tray. The trays, stacked up to 10 tiers high, were put on a very large *kuali* (wok) for steaming. Firewood was used to boil the water in the *kuali*, which needed to be replenished regularly to ensure consistency in the steaming.

After about six hours of steaming over a big fire, the *kueh* was removed from the trays. The surface of the *kueh* was smoothened by pressing down with oil-covered banana leaf to prevent sticking. The *kueh* was then steamed for another six hours over a lower fire to caramelise to a fudge brown colour with a smooth, shiny surface. It would be left to cool completely after cooking, and stored for later use. ❄

## SERVING THE *KUEH BAKOL*

*Kueh bakol* hardens about a week after it is made. It does not spoil or turn mouldy if kept in the open for days or even for months and sunned on alternate days. It can last longer if kept in the fridge. Strip off the dried banana leaves and cut the *kueh* into small squares of about two centimetres each to be steamed again or deep fried.

### Steamed *kueh bakol* with grated coconut (*kueh bakol chueh sama urap kelapa*)

Arrange the squares on a plate without overlapping and steam for at least one hour until the *kueh* has melted to become soft like fudge. Use a chopstick to poke into the soft *kueh* and twist several times until a small ball is formed. Roll the ball in freshly grated coconut mixed with a pinch of salt. Serve immediately.

### Fried *kueh bakol* (*kueh bakol goreng*)

Cut sweet potato or yam into similar 2 cm squares. Sandwich each piece of *kueh bakol* with the sweet potato or yam. Dip into a thin batter of rice flour and water. Deep fry and serve immediately while the 'sandwich' coating is crispy outside and the *kueh bakol* soft inside. ❄



Photography by Colin Chee.



Steamed (top) and fried (bottom) *kueh bakol*.

Food styling and photograph by Anton Kilayko.



# SEWINDU (EIGHTH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION)

Baba Joseph 'Aji' Chen recalls a unique Indonesian Peranakan tradition in his family, influenced by Javanese culture

In our family, the 8<sup>th</sup> birthday calls for a very special celebration. My parents say that the age of eight is the beginning of puberty and the celebration is an initiation into the next stage of life. I am not sure if there are many Indonesian Peranakans who practise this tradition. It is full of symbolism that I believe is strongly influenced by Javanese Muslim culture, depicting multicultural diversity and acceptance. Even the prayers are in Arabic even though we are not Muslim.

All four siblings in my family had very memorable celebrations on turning eight. Papa and Mama would prepare everything one week before the big day. The focus is the *tumpeng* (rice pyramid) with many kinds of mouth-watering condiments. The *tumpeng* is presented on two parts or two *tampah* or *nyiru* (bamboo trays). The first *tampah* has a full set of *tumpeng* with all the condiments. The second *tampah* is adorned with long beans and other condiments.

## The first *tampah*

The *tumpeng* has a tall white and yellow rice cone or mountain, representing two hands clasped together in worship and thanksgiving to God Almighty for all the blessings since our birth, and hopes for a good life. It also represents the mountain spring, where the water supports all life including human beings, animals and plants. The white rice symbolises holiness and the yellow rice represents gold, for good fortune and wealth.

At the top of the *tumpeng* is a hard-boiled egg and a red chilli. The egg represents the life journey while the chilli has a double meaning: To 'brighten' or spice up the life journey.

Beside the rice cone is laid a whole chicken called *pitik ingkung* in Javanese. The chicken is cooked with turmeric and a thick coconut milk broth called *areh*, representing a calm and peaceful heart full of praise for God (*manekung-ingkung*). The feeling of inner peace (*wening*) can be achieved by self-control and absolute patience (*ngereh rasa – areh*). The chicken used is a cockerel (*ayam*

*jago*) that symbolises arrogance, over-confidence, disrespect and other negative qualities. The slaughter of the cockerel means defeating the negatives that can challenge our life journey.

The *tampah* also has a carp or catfish, which is known to be a hardy survivor in the water. It symbolises perseverance and strength to overcome difficulties in life. The tray also has *pethek*, or fish that is salted. The *pethek* move in schools, never alone. They symbolise togetherness and harmony.



The two *tampahs* in the *tumpeng* set at my birthday 33 years ago.

Several kinds of vegetables, boiled and tossed with *gudhangan* or *urap* (grated coconut with spices and herbs) are placed on the tray. They represent simplicity as they are only boiled. The vegetables include spinach (*bayem*) symbolising peace (*tentrem*), beansprouts (*tauge*) representing growth, long beans for foresight and an open mind, and *kluwih* (breadfruit) for a competitive spirit.

Other condiments on the *tumpeng* include fried *tempe* (fermented

soyabeans), fried tofu, shrimp or rice crackers (*kerupuk*), sliced omelette, *sambal goreng* chicken liver and gizzard, fried chicken, beef *rendang* or beef *empal* (a drier version of *rendang*). There are variations according to each family's preference

## The second *tampah*

Besides long beans, the second *tampah* has pineapple symbolising long life, continuous luck and fortune (往來). The bananas represent the good reputation of the family and individual (香蕉) while oranges denote success (大吉大利). Other fruits such as snake-fruit (*salak*) and mangosteens are additional options.

On my 8<sup>th</sup> birthday, I was very excited about the evening celebration. Although it was 33 years ago, I remember the occasion vividly. The invitations had been spread by word of mouth to our neighbors and of course, the elders in our *kampung*



(village). In the afternoon, the *tumpeng* was delivered to our house and placed on the table in our small living room. All the chairs were moved aside to spread the *tikar* (bamboo mat) for guests to sit on the floor. I was so thrilled to see my name 'carved' on the *tumpeng*, with my date of birth. The number '8' candle was placed at the top of the pineapple.

My mother had prepared empty boxes for the guests to bring home some of the *tumpeng* and the condiments.

About *maghrib* time (about 5.30 pm) the guests started to stream in. The men were typically dressed in a sarong, simple shirt and of course *peci* (black



caps). Our tiny living room was soon packed with guests. They greeted and chatted warmly with each other. Then the priest (*pak modin*) announced the start of the ceremony. Everyone sat circling the two *tampah* that were placed in the middle of the floor.

Soon prayers filled the air, very calm and peaceful in tones. I did not understand at all, since it was all in Arabic. After the prayers were completed, the *pak modin* delivered a homily about life and its wisdoms. Then, the moment that all had been waiting for - cutting the *tumpeng*! I cut the top of the *tumpeng* and gave the first cut to Mama, as a show of respect to the one who brought me into the world. The second cut was given to Papa.

The guests were given equal portions and we all ate together. It was a kind of community bonding that has become rare nowadays.

In 2010 and 2012, I continued this tradition with my two sons. I ordered *tumpeng* but it was different from my *tumpeng* in the past. Many of the condiments were compromised. Nevertheless, what was important was

My second son's *sewindu* with many different condiments compared with my own *sewindu* many years ago.

the significance of the eighth year celebration. I hope my sons will carry on the tradition with the next generation when it is time. ❖

At my birthday prayer session with the imam or priest (in white, nearest to camera) leading the prayers.



# NOTHING BEATS GRANDMA'S COOKING

Baba Colin Chee reviews the third and latest cookbook by Rosaline Soon

**T**he indefatigable Rosaline Soon is at it again!

She is on to her third *Grandmothers' Recipes* book in as many years - the first in 2007, *Grandmothers' Recipes: Tales from two Peranakan Kitchens*; the second in 2012, this time co-written with niece Judie Tan, titled *More Grandmothers' Recipes*; and just launched in October this year, also with Julie, a third iteration in the trilogy titled *Grandmothers' Recipes: Sweet & Savoury*.

Will there be a fourth?

Be that as it may, this latest of the three books by Rosaline and her niece is not about just nyonya sweets and savoury snacks. You will also find recipes for other sweets and snacks occasionally prepared in Peranakan kitchens and awaiting beneath the *tudong saji* (food cover). Being the mixed-up people that we are, we often have on our dining tables sweets that are not Peranakan like *mua chee*, *lek tau suan*, cream frosted carrot cake, and orange chiffon cake; and savouries like quiche Lorraine, prawn dumpling or *sui kow*, and shepherd's pie!

It is a strange mix indeed but it is just a simple reflection of the Peranakans' predilection for eating well and trying all types of foods they can get their hands on.

The recipes are packaged in three interesting chapters – Traditional Nyonya Kuehs and Desserts, Seasonal and Celebratory Cakes and Cookies, and Other Everyday Snacks and Desserts.

Do not be fooled. There may be only three chapters of recipes but there are 63 recipes in all, including a few on mooncakes and rice dumplings. Each dish is introduced simply and the ingredients and cooking methodology are made easy.

This should not be a surprise, for the skill in keeping things simple has been honed through many years of teaching her friends and students how to whip up nyonya and other dishes in a jiffy in cooking classes held in Rosaline's large home kitchen.

For *nyonya kueh* she has the usual suspects like *onde onde*, *kueh salat*, *kueh bingka* and *kueh dada*, among others. For the festive cakes and cookies she has the other usual suspects! Traditional fruit cake, carrot cake, sugée cake and almond cookies, to name a few. And for everyday snacks she has all the things you will surely want to eat – from Hokkien *chut bee png* (glutinous rice), to chicken *epok epok* (curry puffs), to lasagne and mango pudding.

Rosaline's rabbits in the hat, however, must be the recipes for the Dumpling Festival – *nyonya chang*, *hokkien bak chang*, crystal kee *chang* and *hae bee hiam chang*. And for the Mooncake Festival,



Rosaline has included recipes for the traditional baked mooncake, snowskin mooncake, Teochew spiral yam mooncake, and Hong Kong walnut mooncake.

These may look formidable, but Rosaline says: "Not to worry lah, these are all do-able at home for the family as they are based on requests at our cooking classes from a wide spectrum of Singaporeans."

But what I particularly like most about Rosaline's three recipe books is that they are well-bound, sturdy to the touch but not heavy, and even likely to survive rough handling in any kitchen. Not the type you see in some other cook books where, after a while, the pages separate from the spine! ❄

**Grandmothers' Recipes – Sweet & Savoury**

By Rosaline Soon and Julia Tan

Available from reputable bookstores

Or email [ros@grandmothersrecipes.com.sg](mailto:ros@grandmothersrecipes.com.sg)



# FLIGHT TO A NEW DAWN

Baba Colin Chee reviews *My Mother-in-Law's Son*

**"A woman has to live her life, or live to repent not having lived it."**

— D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

In many ways this quote from D H Lawrence aptly applies to the heroine of Josephine Chia's book about a Peranakan woman in mainly post-war Singapore – *My Mother-In-Law's Son*.

The story is told fluidly in the first person by the book's main protagonist Swee Gek. She is the "useless" mother of three daughters who could not produce a male heir for her husband Wong Kum Chong, the spoilt corpulent scion of a wealthy Chinese business family.

It is a story of one woman's struggle for personal independence in Singapore's post-war years. Incidentally, women's emancipation is one of the few factors Baba William Gwee mentioned in his new book *A Baba Boyhood* that rang the death knell for the dominance of the Peranakan community in the region.

It is a simple story of Swee Gek, a woman in an unfulfilled marriage to a spineless family scion, whose mother manipulates her banishment from the matrimonial home.

Swee Gek eventually embarks on a transient physical liaison with a British lover visiting Singapore. She decides however to remain in Singapore to raise her three daughters and open a new restaurant, instead of following her lover, Daniel William, back to England.

The book grabs you from the start:

*"A quick grunt. Just like that. No prolonged cry of passion or love. As if he had achieved a physical relief and nothing more. How I wished the muscles of my sex were like scissors that I could snip his off... I loathed his very touch. His sweat trickling onto me..."*

I like Nyonya Josephine's easy and intimate writing style. It draws you into the story. It is simple and speaks directly to you. But do not be deceived. She has that knack of building a story line layer by layer like *kueh lapis*, until you come to this delicious ending:

*"And then I saw my children, standing on the hill, silhouetted against the sunlight. It wouldn't take much for me to recognise even their shadows... The girls must have seen me because they came running down the gentle hill slope. 'Mummy! Mummy!' I opened my arms. I was with them at last. Only for a day to start with. But it was the first day of many days to come."*

The book's story line is cleverly woven into Singapore's post-war history in the 1950s and 1960s. It is not a historical novel by any means. But it gives the reader a good understanding of the kinds of lives led by the rich and poor of those days, the thinking and attitudes of the times, the student riots, the tactics of the communists

in the Chinese schools to gain ascendancy in Singapore. It is in many ways a true-to-life description of Singapore's early post-war history told colourfully, such as:

"At my mother's village, Kampong Kolam Ikan... the village children hardly saw any car.... children could not afford to buy store-bought games so they found amusement or created a game in many ordinary things... guessing which ant would move faster, catching spiders to fight each other; netting the rainbow fishes that lived in the drains or *longkang* (earning the name *longkang* fish), catching eels or edible frogs, racing paper-boats down the swirling water of the *longkang*..."

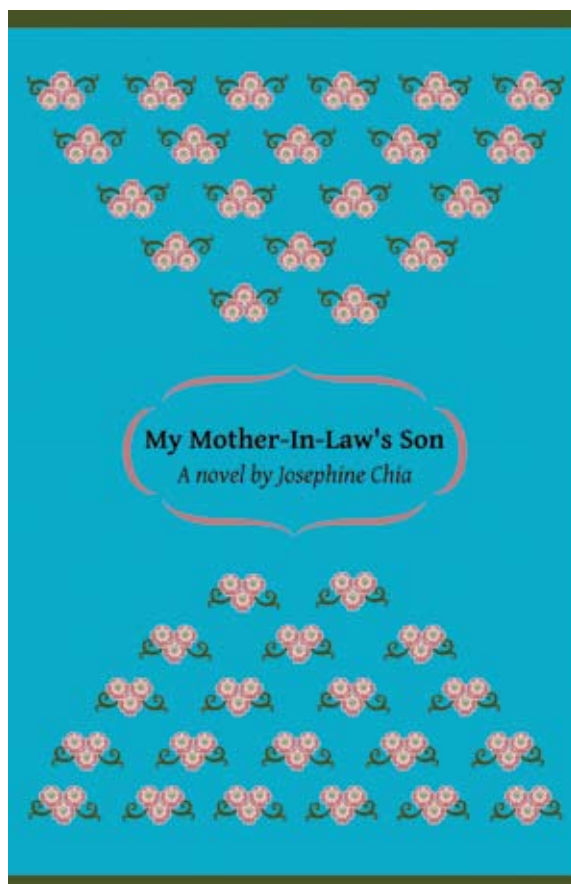
The book was first released 20 years ago. But in many ways this revised edition of the original book has vastly changed in style.

Josephine says: "The manner of expression has altered in society and it needed to be brought up-to-date so-to-speak to make it more readable. Although the storyline remains the same, additional information and scenes were added and created to give a better background to situations and conditions in 1949 and 1950."

She adds: "This is a work of fiction so it's a work of imagination. Of course a writer cannot avoid using some details that have some personal resonance, either from her own experience or through learning of that experience through people she has met."

"Swee Gek's story echoes the stories of women of her time. Many women suffer abuse and situations that Swee Gek suffers. She is driven by the idea of emancipation. She is upset by the imbalance in the way society views a man and woman. In her time, women were unprotected by the law. The Women's Charter did not come in until 1963. Many women, particularly those in the kampong had to deal with lack of education, situations of abuse, husbands who had numerous wives etc. Women also had to deal with strong mothers-in-law and family who look down on certain members of family."

A definitely good read. ❖



***My Mother-In-Law's Son***

By Josephine Chia

Published by Ethos Books

Available in all good bookstores



# FLEETING IMPRESSIONS

Baba Emeric Lau is treated to an evening of light Peranakan bites

**O**h...Singapore! comprised three comedic sketches interspersed with musical interludes. All of 70 minutes long, the production maintained a light-hearted tone throughout. It showcased a selection of Singapore's community theatre talents.

Presented by the 10-year old theatre group Peranakan Siblings, each playlet explored a theme close to the hearts of Peranakan Singaporeans. The first piece, *Tachi Tachi*, saw three bibiks pottering about Singapore's "new" Botanical Gardens, the Gardens by the Bay, and reminiscing over the various plants and trees.

Next up was *Aiyee! Pantang*. As the name suggests, this sketch explored the superstitious practices of apparently modern Singaporeans. Bumbling traditionalists Mr and Mrs Sim move into a condominium and meet their neighbours, Madam Wee and her inquisitive maid, Maria. While Madam Wee appears to be the epitome of modernity, she really has her own superstitious idiosyncrasies, which she tries in vain to keep under her hat.

*First Night at the Wax Museum* was the last in the line-up, and focused on a cleaner's encounter with wax mannequins of Peranakans that come to life at night.

The piece purportedly explores the Peranakans' place in 21<sup>st</sup> century Singapore, though the mannequins mostly bickered pettily between themselves and danced to club beats (including *Gangnam Style*).

While undeniably clichéd, each piece had much potential to examine issues of place and identity, but the material never appeared to delve beyond farcical recollections and easy-to-listen jokes. Still, the cast played up the laughs for all they were worth.

The show also featured Baba William Gwee's original compositions, including *Di-Kebun Bunga*, *Terang Bulan Di Singapura* and *Baju Panjang*. These were performed 'live' by singer and pianist Joshua Jonathan Lim. While ably rendered, this reviewer felt that English translations, perhaps printed alongside the original lyrics in the programme booklet, would have helped those without fluency in Baba Malay.

Overall, *Oh...Singapore!* proved to be an evening of easy insights into the Peranakan way of life for the uninitiated. ❖



The cast of *Oh...Singapore!*

## 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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# CINDERELLA GOES BABA

Baba Emeric Lau delights in catching an adapted classic

As always, Gunong Sayang's annual Wayang Peranakan proved a raucous *rojak* of drama, song and tradition. This year, the spice lay in the association's adaptation of the classic Cinderella plot. The story behind *Tanda Mata Mak* lends itself extremely well: the stepmother remains a domineering, biased matriarch, while her stepdaughter is treated as a household servant.

Taking on her first role as a matriarch, Nyonya Christina Wee succeeds in ageing herself a couple of decades to exude a steely air and deliver scathing admonishments to those she despises. As Nya Putih (Cinderella), Ameline Goh convincingly portrays a beauty in the midst of hardship, slaving away endlessly in the kitchen. Her natural gracefulness is evident from the beginning, and we experience much relief to see her cast off her servant's rags and don the *sarong kebaya* midway through the play.

In contrast, Jessie Cheang appears to wear the mantle of the *amah Majie* Ah Ling superbly. From previous productions, Cheang's history of playing long-suffering but stoic maids serves her well; she admits, "I chose the servant's role as it's less stressful for me. I don't need to *kelang-kabut tukair* (change in a hurry) *sarong kebaya*!" Another reliable cast member is Lee Yong Ming, who invariably guarantees to bring on the laughter with his unique brand of cross-dressing and antics. Playing Nya Merah (the Ugly Daughter), he donned a succession of tacky froufrou dresses and sat with legs wide apart – one dares not contemplate the view that "rewarded" members of the audience seated nearest the stage!

After the mysterious Cinderella is correctly identified as Nya Putih owing to the perfect fit of her *kasot manek*, and also through producing the matching side of the pair, the action shifts to cover events leading up to the wedding. The audience were treated to enactments of significant moments of a Baba wedding, including the presentation of essential items that comprised the *peng kim* (dowry), and the ritual of *cheo tau* or combing the bride's hair. To accompany this visual spectacle, Gunong Sayang produced a beautifully-designed programme booklet with a glossary of terms and several articles covering the subject of heirlooms and wedding practices.

*Tanda Mata Mak* will be remembered for successfully delivering amusing entertainment alongside a heartfelt dose of the traditional. ❀



Lee Yong Ming brings on the laughs.



NYONYA NOSH@Rumah Bebe is the in-house bake-cook shop, a tribute to Peranakan cuisine that reflects the way a nyonya cooks, eats and entertains today. Serving food cooked according to hard-to-find traditional recipes, is not just instantly gratifying but truly memorable.

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24 seasons drums performance



Chanab-making workshop at the Babazaar.

# A CAPITAL CONVENTION

Nyonya Lee Su Kim reports on the first  
Baba Nyonya Convention held in Kuala Lumpur

Peranakans from all over the world gathered in Kuala Lumpur for the 26th Baba Nyonya International Convention (29 Nov – 1 Dec) – the first time ever this event took place in the capital city of Malaysia. Organised by the Peranakan Baba Nyonya Association of Kuala Lumpur & Selangor (PPBNKLS), it was held at the Holiday Villa Resort in Subang Jaya. The Organizing Committee worked for a year preparing for this inaugural event for the young KL association (formed in 2008).

The convention has taken on a truly international flavour, with representation from Peranakan associations from Singapore, Australia, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. The theme for this year's convention was *The Peranakans: Beyond Borders, Across Oceans: Resilience, Resurgence, Reconnection*. It commenced with a grand Gala Dinner with a Peranakan wedding theme. Delegates were treated to variety of performances and got up to *joget* along to a 'live' *keroncong* band.

On the second day, the opening ceremony was graced by Guest-of-Honour Dato Seri Khoo Keat Siew and saw the traditional exchange of gifts of all the Presidents of the associations. The seminar was an engrossing one with three plenary papers presented: this writer spoke on global reconnection of the Peranakans in her paper; The Peranakan Babas and Nyonyas: Beyond Borders, Into Cyberspace. Nyonya Daphne Ang, of the London School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London, spoke on Portraits of the Peranakan Matriarch: The Gaze and Representation of the Formidable Female, and Nyonya Lina Tan, film-maker and founder of Red Communications explored Peranakans in Film.

The Babazaar, a crafts and marketplace event was also held. Workshops on nyonya cooking, the art of *sulam* or embroidery, decorating the *chanab*, making *bunga rampay* potpourris, *bedak sejuk* and paper cuttings were conducted. Delegates also had a



Lee Su Kim's latest book, *Sarong Secrets of Love, Loss and Longing*.

wonderful time dancing and partying at the Dinner and Dance with the nostalgic theme of Old KL at the iconic Chinese assembly Hall in KL on the second night. ❄



Singing a medley.



The audience waiting for the seminar to begin.





*Gala dinner flash mob.*



*Gala night cultural dance.*



*Lau jiat at the iconic Chinese Assembly Hall.*



*Nyonya Dr Lee Su Kim, President of PPBNKLS with the Guest-of-Honour Tuan Haji Mesran on opening night.*



*Opening ceremony and launch of the 26th Convention by Dato Seri Khoo Keat Siew.*



*The happy delegates.*



*The TPAS contingent.*



*Three hilarious bibiks perform at the Dinner & Dance.*



# The Main Wayang Company

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS

2004 - 2014



## The Main Wayang Company

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# THE BEST OF TIMES

Baba Richard Tan reports on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Main Wayang Company

**S**ekejap, kita kelip mata sair (in the wink of an eye), a decade has gone by! Amidst the changes, milestones and memorable moments, our deep passion and cultural direction remain steadfast as ever. We are honoured to have played a small part in bringing joy and togetherness to the Peranakan communities both locally and abroad.

Our early days were filled with excitement; it was pure zeal and zest that served as motivation. With each successful project, we garnered more affirmation and gradually gained recognition. Our faithful *kaki* (helpers) and *kawan* (friends) now number more than 1,500 on our facebook page. *Kamsiah lah!*

So, what's in store for Main Wayang? We are preparing for a full year of interactive shows and events, and focusing on engaging more youth. Our Peranakan performing arts and outreach programme has evolved to include active participation and sharing of stories. We reflect on our forefathers' spirit and tie these to Singapore today.

Numerous schools and heartland groups have indicated interest to collaborate. We hope the message of harmonious cultural integration engenders even greater social harmony. It is also time to revamp, revise and repackage Peranakan culture to make it more accessible to non-Peranakans.

There are more than enough Baba wedding pageants, processions and *sarong kebaya* fashion shows. Main Wayang is reviewing more unique traditional practices and will be expanding our repertoire of offerings.

To herald Main Wayang's 10th Anniversary Celebration, the Main Wayang Singers will kick off the Chingay Parade 2014 with three local dance tunes (*Rasa Sayang*, *Di-Tanjong Katong* and Baba Alvin Oon's composition, *Celebrate Joget*). A fifth Main Wayang music CD will follow a 10th Anniversary Tribute Concert, in addition to a series of touring shows! Perhaps we can culminate in a grand festive Peranakan Weekend? We will keep you posted! ❄

*Top: Stylised Peranakan weddings are happily becoming more popular with the younger generation. On 28 October, Baba Edmond Wong tied the knot with his lovely bride Cai Shiji, in full Peranakan splendour.*

*Below: The Main Wayang singers recording three community songs way in advance for the Chingay Parade 2014.*





# VOICES ON THE BAY!

Nyonya Gwen Ong of The Peranakan Voices does Good

It was a night of *Good Times with Good Friends* at the Esplanade on 10 November. The Peranakan Voices (TPVs) are honoured to have performed to a large audience of familiar faces, friends, tourists, and the young. It brought back memories for many through songs and evoked the nostalgia of a bygone era.

Our performance comprised rearrangements of familiar songs, and credit must be given to Nyonya Christine Chua who accompanied the choir on the piano and Baba Anthony Lee who led us in song. ❀



# TO MELBOURNE WITH MOONCAKES

Nyonya Ivy-Lee Chan finds ample reasons to celebrate the seasons

The Peranakan Association Australia Inc (PAA) celebrated the Mooncake Festival in Melbourne with a lunch on 22 September. The menu included *mee siam*, *soon kueh* and *chicken kapitan*. Children were treated to a story-telling session of Liang and his Magic Brush followed with a canvas painting session, using motifs inspired by the old ceramic tiles used in houses of Peranakans.

For the grown-ups, there was a PAA *Got Talent* show. The varied offerings ranged from *panton* recitation to martial arts, musical revues, a ribbon dance and a tap dance routine. The Melbourne Peranakan Chorus then presented a medley of four songs to the delight of the audience. The audience were also invited to dance, eliciting much amusement. This was followed by afternoon tea which consisted of a platter of mooncake, mandarin oranges and *nyonya kueh* followed.

On 13 October, the Melbourne Peranakan Chorus performed at the *annual Malaysia Street Festival* held at the historic Queen Victoria Market. Braving



an unusually low spring temperature of 17°C with rain to boot, members of the choir entertained the crowd with a medley of six songs among which were *Saya Nyonya Saya Baba*, *Jinkli Nona* and *Papaya*



Joseph doing a tap dance routine, Peranakan style.

The Melbourne Peranakan Chorus in performance.

*Manga Pisang Jambu*. The choir ended on a high note (no pun intended) to shouts of 'Encore' from the crowd which had gathered to watch the performance. ❀



# COMMUNITY EVOLUTION

Michelle Kuek reports from an international conference  
co-hosted by the NUS Baba House and Chinese Heritage Centre



On 27 September, as part of NUS Baba House's 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations, NUS Baba House and Chinese Heritage Centre (CHC) co-organised the conference *Peranakan Communities in the Era of Decolonisation and Globalisation*, a follow-up to the inaugural 2009 conference *Peranakan Chinese in Globalising Southeast Asia: The*

*Cases of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.*

As the first of its kind in Singapore, the 2009 Conference acknowledged the developing field of Peranakan Chinese studies, highlighting general trends and developments through the use of theoretical frameworks and case studies. The conference was co-convened by Mr Kwa Chong Guan (Senior Fellow,

From Right: Panelists Prof Lee Kam Hing, Mr Kwa Chong Guan and Prof Leo Suryadinata at the question and answer session. The conference was held at the National Library.

S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU) and Prof Leo Suryadinata (Director, CHC). It drew 111 delegates from the region. ❄

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#### **Gunong Sayang Association (GSA)**

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Website: gunongsayang.com

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

5001 Beach Road #08-09  
Golden Mile Complex  
Singapore 199588  
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Office: 6297 1229  
Mobile: 9678 1767

### MALAYSIA

#### **MALACCA**

#### **Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM)**

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Email: admin@ppcm-melaka.org  
Website: www.ppcm-melaka.org  
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To contact the President, Datuk Phua Jin Hock, please email phujh@gmail.com.

### PENANG

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NSW 2122 Australia  
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Website: peranakanaustralia.org  
Email: evelyn.peranakan@gmail.com

## WELCOME

We welcome our new members:

Jong Mei Lynn, Melissa  
Jane Yeow

Toh Boon Hwee

Tan Peck Hong Yvonne

Chong Siew Lan (Grace)

Irene Lee Siew Eng

Frederick Lam Beng Hock

Averil Tan

John Koh Kian Lock

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THE PERANAKAN  
MAGAZINE!

FROM BABA PETER WEE



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*Birthday Nasi Kuning*



# 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 Jik 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>.



62275731. Visits are by guided tours. Please call the house for details. <http://www.nus.edu.sg/museum/baba/index.html>

**Kebon Indah.** This exhibition presents the *Malam Di Jari Kita* series of artworks arising from the collaboration of two contemporary artists, Samantha Tio (Mintio) and Budi Agung Kuswara (Kabul), and batik makers of the Sido Luhur group from the central Javanese village of



Kebon Indah. From 27 September 2013 to 30 September 2014

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

**NUS Museum.** Inherited & Salvaged: Family Portraits from the Straits Chinese Collection 28 November 2013 – 6 July 2014, free admission. See over 50 painted and photographed portraits dating from the 19th to early 20th centuries. These are some of the earliest visual representations of Peranakan Chinese in Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. The exhibition explores early portrait making in the region, the social and cultural context sustaining such artistic patronage, and contemporary motivations in collecting and preserving these works. University Cultural Centre, 50 Kent Ridge Crescent, National University of Singapore, Singapore 119279. Tel: 6516 8817 Email: [museum@nus.edu.sg](mailto:museum@nus.edu.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 Spottiswoode Park, Blair Road and Neil Road which is worth a stroll. Visit Guan Antiques nearby at Kampong Bahru Road, a treasure trove of Peranakan heirlooms. [http://www.arch.nus.edu.sg/SOA/design\\_studio/dds2b/blair/study/Blair.html](http://www.arch.nus.edu.sg/SOA/design_studio/dds2b/blair/study/Blair.html).

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



# LAU JIAT SEKALI SAMPAY MABOK DRUNKEN REVELRY

Lawyer Burok cautions against the vagaries of getting sloshed

**P**eranakans, like members of every community, have many celebrations.

Life begins with the 1<sup>st</sup> month or *muh guek* of the child, then the birthday, followed by engagement or *tukar chinchin* (exchange of rings) and then marriage or *kawen*. The annual celebrations of Chinese New Year or Taon Baru, for those who are Christians and many non Christians, is also celebrated by way of *makan besar* (feasting). Then some celebrate when they retire, *kena* (strike) lottery and even when they make big winnings after a game of cards or mahjong!

The *makan besar* would invariably have liquor or *arak* being served and drunk in plentiful quantities. When *arak* is consumed copiously, the *mabok* (drunk) Babas and even Nyonyas may encounter a spot of problem. The *arak* has a propensity to loosen the tongues and statements are made without giving a thought to them, so what ensues may bring some people to blows and as a result a case of physical assault may materialise.

Being in a state of stupor and not knowing what you did to the other is not a defence and never a valid excuse under the law. If you physically assault an Enche (elderly man) or worse, outrage the modesty of a Nyonya at such celebrations, the provisions of the Penal Code can be brought against you.

Having exceeded the lawful alcohol level in your blood system and then driving will get you in trouble under the Road Traffic Act. If you meet with an accident whilst being legally drunk, you would not only be fined, but have your driving license *gantong* (suspended) for at least 18 months which means after the suspension period, you have to take the two-tiered driving test to regain your driving license!

Worse, if you injure or cause the death of another whilst driving under the influence of alcohol, the starless hotel at Upper Changi Road would be your home for at least four weeks!

The best advice to one and all who want to really enjoy such celebrations is to eat, consume alcohol and make merry in moderation. If you want to *joget* (dance) then do so first with your partner; be it your wife or girlfriend. If either decline then venture carefully and *joget* with



Illustration by Peter lee; Inking by John Lee.

another Nyonya but be *sekan sedikit* (a bit cautious) at all times and do not go off limits!

There was this case of an Enche who had a jolly good time at a *joget* party and with many a brandy shot, his tongue and his hands became very 'loose'. He danced through the night with many ladies and ended up being accused of taking liberties with the lower torso of his dancing partner.

At the trial of the matter he pleaded that he was too drunk to know what he was doing and moreover, the lady in question 'encouraged' him by dancing with him at a very close and intimate proximity.

His defence failed as his lady accuser said that every time he put his hands on her waist during the dance it glided downwards and he did so repeatedly despite the protestations of the lady! He was found guilty of outraging the modesty of the lady and spent six weeks in prison. (This was a reported legal case.)

Another case was that of Enche Wee Poh who was invited to his good friend's house at Onan Road in Katong as his friend's wife struck first prize in the 4D lottery after asking for that fateful number from their family deity, the Monkey God or *Tai Seng Yah*.

There was much merry making at the party and after a lot of *arak* was consumed, Enche Wee Poh was found missing in the main hall of the house. When he was eventually found he was at the sink of the kitchen giving a good scrubbing to the statue of *Tai Seng Yah*.

His good friend and the wife of the host were dumbfounded and asked him why he did such a thing. Wee Poh answered, "*Datok Tai Seng Yah tak siah bila gua mintak nombor dari dia, sebab itu gua mandi kan dia kasi suay semua cuci keluar!!!*" ("The god did not answer my prayer for a winning lottery number, so I am bathing him to clean out the bad luck!!!")

Needless to say that was the last time Enche Wee Poh was invited to his friend's house at Onan Road. ❄





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